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# SOUTH ITALIAN FOLKWAYS IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

A HANDBOOK FOR SOCIAL WORKERS,  
VISITING NURSES, SCHOOL TEACHERS,  
AND PHYSICIANS

BY

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**TO CECIL AND EVERARD  
AND IN MEMORY OF JOHN**



*“Noi siamo in mezzo a un popolino che non conosce  
altro galateo di là dal suo; altri usi se non i suoi.”*

*“We are in the midst of a people who know no  
other life pattern than their own; no other customs  
than those of their ancestors.”*

—GIUSEPPE PITRÈ



## FOREWORD

DURING the past few years the Institute of Human Relations has conducted several research projects in the metropolitan area of New Haven. Incident to these studies a large amount of data has been collected, much of which is of interest to those who are concerned with local government and with civic welfare. In response to continuous demands for this information the Institute is publishing parts of it in the form of handbooks.

This is the second in the series of handbooks. The first, published in 1935, is a compilation of statistical information entitled *A Handbook of Social Statistics of New Haven, Connecticut*. This, the second handbook, contains descriptive information concerning one section of the population—the Italians. It is published not as a scientific report but rather as a manual for social workers, lawyers, physicians, and other professional groups.

MARK A. MAY,  
*Director, Institute of Human Relations.*

*March 26, 1938,  
New Haven, Connecticut.*



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## PREFACE

THIS book undertakes to present to social workers, visiting nurses, school teachers, physicians, and others dealing with South Italians the cultural problems these immigrants face in adjusting to life in America. By culture is meant the methods worked out by human groups to solve their life problems. These methods have gained acceptance and have become habitual and traditional in the groups holding them. They include the folkways, mores, and institutions that define their mode of life. Since the central fact in migration is the transfer of people from one group to another, it is essential to an understanding of South Italians to know both their cultural background in the old country and the cultural conflicts they face in this.

The phenomena described in this work are not so transitory as the casual observer may assume. Beliefs in witches and in the Evil Eye color the lives of even third-generation Italians. While they tend to disappear as time goes on, those who would ease the adjustment problems of these people must take them into consideration.

Americans are apt to assume that if an immigrant is given the opportunity to enjoy the advantages this country offers, sometimes almost for the asking, he will seize them with eager hands. But this is not always true. The eager hands are not stretched out, and there is no gratitude for the offer. We conclude that he does not understand, because he is a foreigner, but it is more often we who do not understand what lies behind his refusal. Frequently the explanation lies in his folkways and mores, which cannot be changed by a single interview, nor yet within a year.

For the cultural background of the South Italian, a notable collection of popular Sicilian traditions—*Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*—by Dr. Giuseppe Pitrè has been drawn upon extensively. The work consists of twenty-five volumes, published in 1871–1913. Doctor Pitrè

was a physician by profession and a folklorist by avocation. Since his extensive practice took him into many parts of Sicily, he was able to make a large and varied collection of the folk practices and beliefs of his patients and their families. The *Biblioteca* is thus a mine of information on almost every aspect of the social life and thoughts of these people, gleaned day by day in a most painstaking manner. "No day went by," he wrote<sup>1</sup> in 1896, "without my adding something to my notes. It might be a chance remark of a patient, a proverb, a remedy, or some formula, preserved by the common people in the great book of their experience." Equipped with a knowledge of sociological studies in French, German, and Spanish and of Latin literature, he was also well prepared to analyze and interpret what he collected. Footnotes in the following acknowledge the contributions made by other authors to the perspective given on South Italian culture.

Since two thirds of the Italian immigration took place before the World War, the old-world materials presented emphasize the South Italian cultural patterns of the first part of this century. A total of 36.4 per cent of our immigrants from Italy, as a matter of fact, came to America in 1901–10. So that none will confuse these conditions with those now found in Italy, irrelevant as they are to the purposes of this book, the "*In Italy*" section of each chapter is given in the past tense.

The part of the present volume that deals with the scene in America was gathered entirely at first hand during contact for eleven years with over five hundred Italian and Italian-American families drawn from practically all parts of Italy. The instances upon which this material is based are not cases in the statistical sense. In a cultural as contrasted with a statistical study, the individual appears not as a disparate unit but as a representative or spokesman for the group. Specific instances are used throughout to illustrate as vividly as possible the cultural conflicts involved.

The people whose folkways and mores are described do not

1. *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. viii.

represent a cross section of the Italians either in this country or in Italy, as Chapter I points out in detail. They are chiefly peasants and fishing folk. They come from the six southern states, including Sicily, and represent somewhat the fringe of Italian civilization. They are not an integrated ethnic unit. They do not have even a dialect in common. A knowledge of their culture, however, is useful in dealing with any Italian and—for purposes of comparison—any immigrant group.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Maurice R. Davie of Yale University under whose direction this book has been prepared and written. Without his generous aid and encouragement, it would never have been completed. I wish also to thank Professor James G. Leyburn of Yale for first drawing my attention to the possibilities of a study of the Italo-Americans. His keen criticism has been most helpful.

My thanks are due to Dr. Vittorio Racca for valuable information regarding Italian folkways, to Mr. Joseph Raschella for checking the Italian text, to Mr. Douglas Northrop for considerable clerical assistance, and to Mrs. Ruth Chapman for help in the final preparation of this material for publication.

It is impossible to enumerate the many kind Italian friends who have spent hours with me telling of their life in Italy and their problems of adjustment here. I shall remember them with deep gratitude. I want to mention especially Mrs. Isolina Lupo, Mrs. Louise Carnevale and her family, Mr. and Mrs. Angelo Coppola, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Carocci, Mr. and Mrs. Gabriele Gambardella and family, Mr. and Mrs. Salvatore Lantieri, Mrs. Maria Ippolito, and Mr. Giuseppe Reitano. When they see some of their stories and beliefs set down on the printed page, they may feel that they have not been understood, that wrong interpretations have been placed on their ideas, and that they have been made to appear in an unfavorable light. If such should be the case, I would remind them that a description of a cultural trait from any group is likely to call forth the same criticism. "For every people tends to regard its own culture as superior, not perfect, perhaps,

but essentially admirable. In such an emotional outlook there is no place for the possibility that one's culture may be employing at certain points stone-age axes side by side with its modern industrial machines.”<sup>2</sup>

PHYLLIS H. WILLIAMS

*New Haven, Connecticut,*  
*March 26, 1938.*

2. R. S. and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1937, p. xiv.

# SOUTH ITALIAN FOLKWAYS IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

## CHAPTER I THE HOMELAND

**I**N the Italy from which our immigrants have come, two distinct peoples were closely associated in a relatively small area. There were in fact two Italys, one in the north and one in the south, each with its people thinking, behaving, and living differently. Their inhabitants frequently demonstrated so much antipathy toward those in the other section for it scarcely to seem possible that they belonged to the same nation. "The North Italian is Teutonic in blood and appearance, and belongs to the Alpine division of the white race in Europe. . . . The South Italian, who descends with less mixture from the ancient inhabitants of Italy, belongs to the Mediterranean branch."<sup>1</sup> Ideas and customs typical of Central Europe were found in North Italy. As for the south, an experienced French traveler<sup>2</sup> commented at the beginning of the nineteenth century, "*L'Europe finit à Naples, et même elle y finit assez mal. La Calabre, la Sicile, tout le reste est de l'Afrique.*" In the early twentieth century, as the traveler went south he still appeared to cross an invisible frontier into a new and strange land. This imaginary line ran roughly from Giulanova, just north of Pescara on the Adriatic, to Anzio in South Latium on the Tyrrhenian Sea (see frontispiece).

These fundamental dissimilarities occurred in what to an American seems a relatively small area. Italy with its 119,744 square miles is slightly smaller than New Mexico, and Sicily's 9,935 square miles approximate the size of Mary-

1. M. R. Davie, *World Immigration*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1936, p. 108.

2. Crené de Lesser, *Voyage en Italie et en Sicile*, Paris, P. Didot l'Ainé, 1806, p. 86. "Europe ends at Naples, and it ends there badly enough. Calabria, Sicily, all the rest is African."

land. The leg of the boot-shaped peninsula is nowhere more than 150 miles across, but it has more than 580 miles of land frontier and over 2,500 miles of coast which have made it accessible by land and especially by sea for hundreds of years.

The considerable variations in climate throughout the peninsula do not permit one to generalize that South or North Italians live in relatively warm or cool districts. Not in the Alps alone but also in the central range of the Apennines and in the upland valleys of Abruzzi are some of the coldest districts of Italy to be found. In the plains and hills near Naples snow is rarely seen and never remains long. Twenty miles east from Naples, however, the fertile valley of Avellino, of no great elevation but encircled by high mountains, has light frosts as late as June. Since Avellino was in the heart of their area, Neapolitans were subjected to wide variations in temperature. On the whole, the climate of southern Italy, despite the snow on its mountains for most of the year, averages warmer than that of the northern part, and the shore districts of the south enjoy conditions similar to those of Greece and the southern provinces of Spain.

The climatic differences between southern and northern Italy influenced the economic life of the country particularly through rainfall peculiarities. South Italy has a relatively slight precipitation, and this lack of water, which varies locally and seasonally and over long periods of time, was reflected in the general customs as well as in the economic practices of the people. The average fall of only twenty-six inches at Naples, in contrast with New York's fifty, occurs chiefly in the winter months. Sicily, once so fertile that it was called "the granary of Rome," now gets only half as much rain as New England during March, April, and September, months in which precipitation is most needed. The fall on the east coast of the island, at Syracuse, has been as little as one inch during June, July, and August.

The long-time tendency toward less rainfall in South Italy and Sicily has contributed heavily to deforestation and erosion. The lack of rain makes a poor growing season for trees, and this joins with the absence of coal to make the destruc-

tion of forests outrun replenishment. Land and lumber speculation, the rights that many communes (villages) had over forests, and to some extent excessive taxation, which forced proprietors to cut and sell their trees and then abandon the ground, all aided in the denudation. These factors plus the unrestricted pasturage of goats held natural as well as artificial reforestation in check. Efforts by the central government before the World War to unify and coördinate the forest laws of the various states<sup>8</sup> came belatedly and met great local opposition. As a result, the scant rainfall was not held by forests or sod to the extent necessary, and streams became torrents for short periods and then dried up. Soil from the hills deposited in the valleys, choked their drainage, and formed swamps in which malaria mosquitoes bred. These accumulative ills, in addition to the deterioration of the seaport trade and other factors, aided decisively in the depopulation. Metaponto, once rich and powerful, scarcely left even a name behind, and Siri, "reduced to a small village of a few hundred inhabitants," was "devastated by the two chief sores of South Italian agriculture: the Latifondo [a system of land-ownership] and malaria."<sup>9</sup> This acute problem of water shortage and its attendant ills afflicted chiefly four of the South Italian states: Campania, Apulia, Calabria, and above all Basilicata.

Little wonder then, in view of these facts, that the whole social system of South Italy was colored by this water scarcity. In places like Apulia, where the shortage was greatest, the municipal authorities restricted consumption and maintained a watchman at the public fountain to enforce their orders. The poorest people washed their clothes only once in three or four weeks. In many places water selling was a trade, with some vendors specializing in drinking water and others in laundry water for those rich enough to buy.<sup>10</sup> In Sicily,

8. Paul Radin, in *The Italians of San Francisco*, San Francisco, SERA Monograph No. 1, Part II, August, 1935, p. 124, describes the control of wood utilization at Scala, Campania.

9. Cesare Cagli, *La Basilicata ed il problema dell'immigrazione e della colonizzazione interna*, Rome, Carlo Colombo, 1910, p. 6.

10. Drinking water was known as *acqua potabile* (drinkable water), as opposed to *acqua di pozzo* (well water), not thought fit to drink.

where both sexes carried on the trade, the peddlers were known as barrel-men and barrel-women. The seller of drinking water often had a portable stand on which were glasses, a pitcher, and a bottle of anise for flavoring. He was a common sight in Sicilian towns where he cried musically through the streets, "Heart's cheer! Heart's reviver! Come and try my water. Not one cent will I ask of you if it isn't fresh." In places not too remote from the hills, this man had to go out early in the morning to get ice or snow from the caves where it might be found unmelted for a large part of the year.

The style of flasks carried by shepherds who followed their sheep far from safe springs illustrates the sort of adjustment necessitated by the general water shortage. These containers, when inverted, permitted water to issue in a light spray sufficient to moisten the mouth without allowing any great quantity to escape.

The fact that it was frequently necessary to go long distances to obtain drinking water, added to the high rent often demanded for private springs, lays bare the chief root of many customs that seem strange and possibly almost offensive to Americans. The South Italian drank relatively little water, even at meal times.<sup>6</sup> Piles of soiled underwear and sheets heaped in a corner or thrust into an old cupboard reflect the persistence of old-world customs rather than a slovenly attitude. In Italy, on the arrival of washday (once in three or four weeks), the women carried the accumulated articles to the nearest lake or river. There they spent the whole day together, working and gossiping over their affairs and those of their neighbors. A recreation indeed, compared with the lonely Monday session in America over a washtub or an electric machine! In some parts of Calabria, the washing of a newborn baby in wine became another of the many adaptations to this ever-present need. For hundreds of years, when

6. Almeda King, in *A Study of the Italian Diet in a Group of New Haven Families*, New Haven, MS. M. S. Essay on file in Yale University Library, 1935, pp. 180-181, comments on this point thus: "At meals, very little water was taken even when no wine was served. . . . One Italian woman with whom this limited use of water by the Italians was discussed, quoted a proverb which she said meant, that water 'rusted human stomachs and intestines.'"

no well or even spring was considered wholly free from question of pollution, wine was thought to be the only safe drink.

"As a kid," recalled a man<sup>7</sup> who came from a small farm in Asti, Piedmont, "and up to the time I left home, I used to get an occasional bath in the river during the summer time but never during the winter months. This was true of the whole family, and my father, who is eighty years old, I have never known to take a bath." The American should realize that a like standard in this country satisfies many Italians, to whom elaborate rinsings of vegetables and frequent baths seem useless and even dangerous.

In view of these conditions, the existence in South Italy of varied vegetable gardens and groves of fine lemon, orange, fig, and other trees testified to the infinite care with which they were tended. Plants were set in places chosen with care and prepared with an enormous expenditure of labor. Since pasturage was equally difficult to maintain, cows were few and served as draught animals as well as sources of milk and cheese. This restricted the milk supply even more.

The heavier and more regular rainfall of North Italy, together with numerous rivers and lakes, make such valleys as that of the Po—Italy's largest river—a veritable Garden of Eden in contrast with the fields of the southern section. Despite these conditions favorable to agriculture, however, industrial activities explain the greater prosperity of North Italy. Coal was also absent in the north, but its place was filled by "white coal"—water power—bountifully supplied by the numerous rivers and of recent years harnessed by power plants that have cost millions of lire. Life in the valleys and on the well-watered plains of the north approximated that of the more prosperous and highly civilized peoples of Central Europe.

Historical events have had as notable a share as geographical conditions in determining the trend of civilization in Italy. While events in its history exerted a favorable influence generally in the north, in the south they usually became additional obstacles. In early times, Italy and especially

7. Quoted by Paul Radin, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

South Italy was the scene of repeated invasions by one foreign power after another. Civilization was replaced by civilization, "if indeed they were all worthy of this name," comments Giuseppe Pitrè<sup>8</sup> bitterly. These influxes of foreigners produced in the native population an overpowering sense of antagonism and suspicion of ruling powers. Foreign exploitation joined with climate and malaria in ravaging the south, "between 300 b.c. and 100 a.d. . . . one of the richest and most prosperous portions of the country as well as a center of culture."<sup>9</sup>

Greeks, Saracens, and Normans all ruled at different periods in the south and all left their marks upon language, customs, and beliefs. Little Sicilian carts carry paintings of historical scenes from the lives of the Paladins of France. The public storyteller (*contastorie*), found in the town square, recounted to those who later became Italo-Americans adventures of Crusaders fighting the Infidels. Some of the oldest shepherds' flutes and horn drinking cups are carved with scenes from the combats between Renard and Count Orlando, characters in the French *Chansons de Geste*. Still others, reminiscent of the Crusades, depict little children with crosses in their hands. These and many more crude records of the past testify to the traditions that were absorbed by the South Italians. "The past is not dead," observes Pitrè.<sup>10</sup> "It lives always in us and with us." It left visible traces in the humble tools and household possessions of the peasants. It left others, often unrecognized as such, in faces and forms. Still more were deeply engraved in their minds, as mental habits governing their daily thought processes. These traces are now fast dying out both in the seacoast towns, once the site of important Greek and Saracen settlements, and in the inland villages, always rather isolated from outside influences.

History dealt differently with the north. Although this section was by no means free from the invasions of foreigners or their depredations, such city states as Florence, Bologna,

8. *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. viii.

9. Paul Radin, *op. cit.*, Part I, July, 1935, p. 48.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. xi.

and Milan were too strong and prosperous to serve merely as fields for exploitation. Those who came, came to stay. Though primarily invaders, they gradually became absorbed into the population and contributed constructively on the whole to the development of the district. The north was always in a more fluctuating state than the south, more acculturated to the customs of Central Europe and far less antagonistic than the south to innovations. It welcomed the unification of Italy in 1870 without reservation. From its political viewpoint, this act meant new strength, whereas to South Italy and especially to Sicily it was to bring little advantage.

The peculiar historical and geographical backgrounds of South Italy and their contrast with those of the north have given southern cultural patterns certain definite characteristics. The south, for one thing, exemplified its popular tradition of no coöperation with the government in its moral code of *omertà* (manliness). This group of practices and theories "demands firmness, energy, and seriousness, a self-reliant and self-conscious mind whose activities are as far as possible independent of the civil authorities."<sup>11</sup> Forces opposing civil authority thus received the support of these people with little regard for their broader implications. The code was a reflection of the people's in-group solidarity with its concomitant suspicion of strangers and of those placed over them. Their suspiciousness, however, did not stop here. It was even manifested in a lesser degree toward fellow townsmen and members of the same family. "The Romans called the Sicilians a *genus acutum et suspiciosum*, calculating and quarrelsome, a criticism that they still merit."<sup>12</sup> This characterization also applied to the continental South Italian.

The conditions that characterized the mental habits of South Italians with suspiciousness also gave them a more overt adaptation to such problems—a sign language. Although vestiges of it were also to be found among other South Italian groups, its use was largely confined to Sicilians. It is

11. R. E. Park and H. A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1921, p. 10.

12. Alexander Rumpelt, *Sizilien und die Sizilianer*, Berlin, Allgemeine Verein für Deutsche Litteratur, 1902, p. 16.

said to have arisen to meet the need for secret communication in the presence of foreign oppressors. It was particularly useful to members of secret societies, like the *Camorra* and the *Mafia*, and to remind people of the principle of *omertà*. Many of the gestures involved were made with the action of the hand or fingers on the nose with slight variations denoting different words. A nod of the head, among non-Italians an indication of acquiescence or affirmation, meant among the Sicilians, "no."

Fatalism was another well-defined cultural characteristic that colored the ideas of these people. Some writers attribute this, as well as the comparative seclusion of the women—more strictly enforced in Sicily than elsewhere—to the influence of the East, the close contact with Turks and Saracens. Sir J. Rennell Rodd,<sup>18</sup> British ambassador to Italy and a keen observer of culture who lived there for over twenty years, states it thus:

On the South the influence of the East left an enduring mark; something of the fatalism of the Oriental may still be traced there, with a similar inclination to procrastinate and a reluctance to face definite issues, a resignation which accepts disappointment with the unprotesting word *pasienda* (patience).

Together with this fatalistic view of life and its apparently related slowness and casualness of pace, one readily sensed a steady plodding persistence born of the small incentives and scant opportunities of this land.

Its environmental, historical, and cultural characteristics made South Italy the home of all that an American would call unhealthy in political life. To many a southerner, "the commune is everything and the State is very little; the commune and its doings and its struggles make a big part of his life, while the far-off Government at Rome vanishes to a speck." The proportion of the population having the vote accentuated this situation. Before 1882, it was only 2 per cent, and by 1913, it was a little over seven. "The disqualification of illiteracy disfranchises a very large number, especially in the

18. *The Italian People*, London, Oxford University Press, 1920, p. 9; from the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. IX.

South and parts of the Centre.”<sup>14</sup> Political neglect of the south has been traditional. At the time of unification, Basilicata had no railways, only 400 kilometres of traversible roads, and 91 villages without ready means of communication between them or with the other nearest town. It was practically cut off from the rest of Europe.<sup>15</sup> And yet, this state in common with others in this impoverished section of Italy had to bear a burden of taxation proportional to the more prosperous political units. The communes, in turn, “have copied the state only too faithfully in throwing the burden of taxation on the poor.” The recourse from such abuses was far from easy. “The people may rebel, but they are powerless to effect a change because of the corrupt political system, both the local and the governmental.” The commune officials realized that they must keep the anger of the populace in check, and they therefore spent large sums on feast-day celebrations, with expensive “illuminations and explosion of petards in the streets at no small risk to the limbs of the crowd and the tottering houses. £1200 is spent on one piece of fireworks to make a Roman holiday.”<sup>16</sup>

The commune or village both formed the social center and circumscribed the social horizon of most South Italians. Depending mainly on its own resources for economic support and restricting marriage largely to members of its own group, it was almost a complete entity in itself. The mountain chains of South Italy contributed to this isolation into small units, whether the settlements were located in narrow valleys, on hilltops, or by the seashore. The term *campanilismo*, meaning that which is within sound of the village bell, was the apt label given by the natives to this regionalism.

No cultural trait reflected more clearly the *campanilismo* of Italy than the array of dialects found throughout the kingdom. Each state had its own dialect, and each section of a state had local variations. Educated people knew and spoke Italian and in addition among themselves used the dialect pe-

14. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *Italy Today*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, pp. 268, 14.

15. Umberto Gianotti-Bianco, *La Basilicata*, Rome, R. Garroni, 1926, p. 6.

16. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *op. cit.*, pp. 266, 267.

cular to their native section. The royal family of the House of Savoy used the Savoyan dialect, which was incomprehensible to inhabitants, say, of Apulia. The following words illustrate the more extreme differences: celery in Italian is *sedono*, in Neapolitan, *alaccia*; witch in Italian is *maga*, in Neapolitan, *iannara*, in Sicilian, *donna di fuora*. Then there were differences in the spelling of words, such as: Italian, *più*, Neapolitan, *chiù*; Italian, *bello*, Sicilian, *beddu*. Substitutions of *ch* for *p* and of *dd* for *ll* were not made consistently throughout Italy; e.g., Italian, *cipolla*, Randazzo, *cipulli*, and Girgenti, *cipudda*, for onion. Randazzo and Girgenti were Sicilian towns at no great distance from each other. Little wonder that "there is perhaps no other country where dialect occupies such a conspicuous place in literature."<sup>17</sup> This product of geographic isolation and other differences thus acted as a powerful hindrance to homogeneity among the inhabitants of a state and of the various states. An Italian<sup>18</sup> of Fontamara in the Department of Abruzzi and Molise gives the point of view of his own village thus:

Let no one get it into his head that Fontamarans speak Italian. The Italian language is for us a foreign language, a dead language, a language whose vocabulary and grammar have grown complex without remaining in touch with us, our way of living, our way of acting, our way of thinking, or our way of expressing ourselves. Of course other farmers of the south besides myself have spoken and written Italian, just as when we go to the city we have our shoes shined and wear a collar with a tie around it. But you have only to look at us to observe our awkwardness. It is true that to express oneself well in any language, one must first learn to think in it, then the trouble that we have in speaking this Italian clearly must mean that we do not know how to think in it, and that this Italian culture is a foreign one to us.

The *campanilismo* of Italy is particularly apparent among immigrants in their exclusive use of the word *paesano* (a per-

17. J. R. Rodd, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

18. Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara*, New York, H. Smith and R. Haas, 1934, p. xviii.

son from the same district or town as the speaker), to indicate an old-world bond. If two women are seen walking together on the street, they are almost sure to be *paesane*. The young mother who comes to the clinic brings her *paesana* with her for propriety's sake. The foreman on the job hires as many *paesani* as possible because he will thus have less dissension; an unexplained dismissal is frequently because a man is a *forestiere* (stranger), not a *paesano* albeit a compatriot. Ten Neapolitan, one Sicilian, and one Calabrian women attending a cooking school all treated one another cordially during the lessons, but the latter two did not form friendships with any of the others, despite the nearness of their homes in some cases to one another. The Sicilian woman brought her sister, and the Calabrian was accompanied by a *paesana* to each session of the class, not for the benefit of the instruction but simply for the sake of propriety and companionship during the walk. Both the uninvited women lived at a distance of several blocks.

In view of these strong regional differences, the groupings of Italian political divisions made by the Central Institute of Statistics of Italy, by the United States Department of Labor, and by the Italo-Americans studied, given herewith, contain striking divergences. The Institute or Italian census arrangement indicates some understanding of the various factors discussed above. The classification made by the Department of Labor, on the other hand, is an arbitrary one based on whether a state is north or south of the River Po. The Ligurian, for example, objects to this division because it puts his native district in the same group with Calabria and Basilicata. He is proud of the fact that as early as 1911 his state had the highest proportion of children in secondary schools—6.60 per 1,000—of all the states in the kingdom; Calabria had only 2.27; and Basilicata, the lowest of all, 1.65.<sup>19</sup> The popular notions of Italian regionalism gained from interviews with immigrants, are the most workable ones to use.

19. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, New York, The Encyclopædia Britannica Co., 1911, Vol. XV, p. 166.

## GROUPINGS OF ITALIAN POLITICAL DIVISIONS

<i>Central Institute of Statistics of Italy</i>	<i>U. S. Department of Labor</i>	<i>By Italo-Americans</i>
<b>NORTH:</b>	<b>NORTH:</b>	<b>NORTH:</b>
Emilia	Emilia	Emilia
Lombardy	Lombardy	Lombardy
Piedmont	Piedmont	Piedmont
Veneto	Veneto	Veneto
Venice Giulia & Zara	Venice Giulia & Zara	Venice Giulia & Zara
Venice Tridentina	Venice Tridentina	Venice Tridentina
Liguria		Lazio (Rome)
		Liguria
		Marches
		Tuscany
		Umbria
<b>CENTRAL:</b>	<b>SOUTH:</b>	<b>CENTRAL OR SOUTH:</b>
Lazio (Rome)	Lazio (Rome)	Abruzzi & Molise
Marches	Liguria	
Tuscany	Marches	
Umbria	Tuscany	
	Umbria	
<b>SOUTH:</b>		<b>SOUTH:</b>
Abruzzi & Molise	Abruzzi & Molise	
Apulia	Apulia	Apulia
Basilicata (Lucania)*	Basilicata (Lucania)*	Basilicata (Lucania)*
Calabria	Calabria	Calabria
Campania (Neapolitan)	Campania (Neapolitan)	Campania (Neapolitan)
<b>INSULAR:</b>		
Sardinia	Sardinia	Sardinia
Sicily	Sicily	Sicily

\* Mussolini has changed the old name of Basilicata to Lucania. The new name is not used by the Italians in this country, many of whom left Italy before the change was made.

From these evidences of regional differences, one appreciates how an immigrant arriving in this country may be and frequently has been associated with a district having a culture almost as foreign to him as that of the old-stock Americans themselves. Such divisions as Lombardy, Tuscany, and Apulia mean little to Americans other than Immigrant Service officials and other specialists, but the "man in the street" has accumulated some definite ideas regarding the contrast between the South Italian and the North Italian. This tends to raise the status of those who are able to establish a North Italian background. Since the average American confuses districts and even goes so far as to classify all Italians with other relatively recent immigrants as outsiders and undesirables, his generalizations and those of many popular writers give unsound estimates of racial characteristics and derogatory evaluations of culture traits. "I have often asked myself," one writer<sup>20</sup> asserts, in illustration, "What is the Italian's most dominant characteristic?" After "mature reflection," he concludes that "it is that he believes what he wants to believe and that he does not trust any one implicitly," that he "trusts his own fellow citizen least of all." Suspiciousness is mentioned above in relation to southern mores. Wishful thinking, however, can scarcely be called a peculiarity of any given group of human beings.

Italian folk sayings derogatory of other districts furnish a sharp contrast to the American's lumping together of all Italians. Benevento in Campania, for example, was said to be the home of the witches. They assembled there every night at a famous nut tree and then flew from it over the countryside.

Sopra acqua e sopra vento  
Sopra li noci di Benevento.

Over the water and over the wind  
Over the nut trees of Benevento.

20. Joseph Collins, *Idling in Italy*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920, p. 204.

The following rhyme popularly repeated regarding the people of Scafati described them in no uncertain terms:

Scafati, schifeti, anche l'herba è malamente  
Brutt' acqua e brutta gente.

The people of Scafati smell to the skies;  
They are worth no more than the grass underfoot.

The Neapolitans accuse the Calabrians of having *teste dure* (thick heads). The saying, “*Non c’è sole nel Castellamare*” (“There is no sun in Castellamare”), may merely arise from the existence there of a large state prison. The inhabitants of Girgenti (Agrigentum on the south coast of Sicily) were reported to be so quarrelsome and treacherous that they would eat bread with a man and then stab him in the back afterwards on the street.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the origin of these sayings, their currency intensifies the contrast between the American’s notion of the Italian and the Italian’s identification of himself with the culture of a specific state and especially of a single village or commune. Oblivious to these differences, the American frequently characterizes the Italian as “a dirty, undersized individual, who engages in degrading labor shunned by Americans, and who is often a member of the Mafia, and as such likely at any moment to draw a knife and stab you in the back.”<sup>22</sup>

This contrast is quite explainable in terms of the reasons for the Italian’s presence in our country. America wanted cheap unskilled labor. The Italian and other immigrants filled this demand. Here the matter usually ended so far as purchasers of labor were concerned. “If the immigrant were a horse instead of a human being, America would be more care-

21. S. C. Musson, in his *Sicily*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1911, p. 156, attributes this characterization of the people of Girgenti to their descent from “an unruly colony of Berbers.” He also recalls that “the reports in the agrarian inquiry instituted by Parliament in 1884 describe in the province of Girgenti a hideous and shameless immorality, condoned by public opinion.”

22. Emily F. Meade, “Italian Immigration into the South,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, July, 1905, Vol. 14, p. 218.

ful of him; if it loses a horse it feels it loses something, if it loses an immigrant it feels it loses nothing."<sup>23</sup> The immigrant, however, would scarcely wish to trade his "freedom of choice" for the "protection" of a property relationship. Let us also look at the Italian's reasons for coming to this country—factors closely related to the character of the states and communes from which he emigrated.

Numerous forces precipitated the vast migration from Italy to the United States. This mass movement is termed by one writer<sup>24</sup> "well-nigh expulsion." Before 1900, "only the more progressive regions, with a numerous population, had large rates of emigration." In other districts, especially the south, Sicily, and Sardinia, "the motives making for a smaller emigration rate were the traditional love of country and home, the fear of a new life, the conditions of moral and political inferiority in which the old separatist regimes had kept the people, the greater stability of populations unused to the intensive labor developed in the north, and less urgent economic necessity of a life almost exclusively agricultural and patriarchal."<sup>25</sup> The greatest emigration increases in this century (see table), on the whole, came then in the regions prevailingly agricultural and with a relatively sparse population. A student of the subject<sup>26</sup> concludes from this that emigration did not result from overpopulation. She finds no relation between emigration and density. She leaves out of consideration, however, the full import of that weighty factor in the man-land ratio, the productivity of the land at a given stage of the arts.<sup>27</sup> Extreme poverty functioned as the strongest cause of emigration. In the south, opportunities

23. H. G. Duncan, *Immigration and Assimilation*, Boston, D. C. Heath & Co., 1938, p. 562.

24. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 49.

25. Anna M. Ratti, "Italian Emigration," in W. F. Wilcox, *International Migrations*, New York, National Bureau of Economic Research, 1931, Vol. II, p. 447.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 448.

27. See A. G. Keller, *Man's Rough Road*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1932, pp. 68-67.

for the aggressive practically did not exist. An Italian,<sup>28</sup> to illustrate, asked some of his countrymen working in Switzerland if they loved their native land. "They answered me, smil-

AVERAGE EMIGRATION FROM ITALIAN STATES  
PER 10,000 INHABITANTS\*

	1876-1886	1887-1900	1901-1909
Piedmont	96	85	162
Liguria	59	43	60
Lombardy	53	53	113
Venetia	184	824	298
Emilia	28	50	138
Tuscany	40	57	117
Marches	10	42	204
Umbria	0.5	10	144
Latiun (Rome)	0.5	10	98
Abruzzi & Molise	31	102	337
Campania	34	96	222
Apulia	8.9	17	104
Basilicata (Lucania)	108	184	305
Calabria	44	115	308
Sicily	7	44	210
Sardinia	1.5	7	62
<i>All Italy</i>	47	87	179

\* R. F. Foerster, *op. cit.*, p. 529; data of the Bureau of Statistics compiled by the Commissioner-General of Emigration, see *Boletino di Emigrazione*, 1910, No. 18, p. 5. The population used was that for the middle of each period. The table covers roughly the period in which the subjects of this study left Italy.

ing, as if I had spoken of some stranger, 'Italy is for us who-ever gives us our bread.' " The following characteristic statement by a Campanian<sup>29</sup> is added for comparison.

28. Pasquale Villari, "L'emigrazione e le sue conseguenze in Italia," *Nuova Antologia*, Jan. 1, 1907, p. 58; quoted in R. F. Foerster, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

29. An informant quoted by H. G. Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 564.

For me, America has proved itself and promises to continue to prove itself the land of opportunity, but I have not forgotten Italy—it is foolish to tell any Italian to forget Italy. I say Italy; but for me, as for the others, Italy is the little village where I was raised.

The people who came in such numbers and so recently from South Italy were for the most part peasants, fishermen, and unskilled laborers. They knew nothing of big-city life. When they settled down—as most of them did in the east—in large industrial towns, they presented more serious problems of adaptation than as if they had been steered into occupational districts more comparable with those they had left. To facilitate their assimilation into urban society, they frequently tried to conceal their peasant origin and to create the illusion that they came from a city in Italy, a device also common (and for similar reasons) among American migrants from a "hick" village to New York or Chicago. Their port of departure, Naples (*la grande città*), usually served the purpose. The resulting confusion of a social worker in her early efforts to ascertain the old-country background of a family sometimes elicits pointed rejoinders from other Italians. "Roman, nothing," one woman declared heatedly of a relative who claimed Rome as his birthplace. "The liar! He's a damn Scafatese." As a homesick informant, born in Naples commented, "People in New England, when asked where they come from, say: 'I am from Naples.' They are not, or they would not be here. Naples is not Italy. If one lives away from Naples, the heart is broken!"

Generally speaking, few Italians wish to return to Italy to live. Although this may not have been their original intention, immigrants usually stay. Despite early plans to save enough money to return to live in comfort in their old homes, children and the World War and other complications eventually made the prospects seem less alluring. "To visit Italy for a month or two, yes," commented a woman, "but not to stay. They always fight there; every ten years there is war. The man he goes to fight and the woman she work like the jack-ass." So they stay, as did earlier North Europeans with simi-

lar purposes at the outset of their new-world venture. As relatives and friends in Italy die out, their longings to return to live grow less.

The situation of the woman who longed for Naples and that of the one who could only remember the incessant toil and constant threat of war represent a striking disparity that has chiefly an economic basis. The former came from the so-called leisure class. Though she had a comparatively low standard of living in Italy as compared with what she enjoys in America, she longed for the security of her homeland, assured her by class prestige and other economic and social relationships. In America, her economic status was lower than that of many of her peasant compatriots among whom she lived and whose proximity and relative prosperity caused her to lose that sense of class superiority which was one of the few values in her life. The latter woman, a peasant, had gained in both prestige and security.

When social workers have acquired a fair knowledge of the differences that regional backgrounds make in Italian immigrants, their ability to approach individuals and family groups acceptably is greatly enhanced. Certain signs by which the origin of a family may be guessed aid the visitor in placing the father or mother at ease by not asking for the performance of small skills such as the writing or spelling of family names, always embarrassing to the South Italian with little or no schooling. The absence of all or most holy statues and the slight use of gesticulation in conversation, for instance, usually mark northerners. The belief in and free discussion of witches, characteristic of certain southern regions, are discussed in another chapter. Seclusion of the women, belief that women should not work outside the home, and a dialect almost incomprehensible to all other Italians are typical of Sicilians. Types of food, attitudes toward the government, and mortuary rites vary from section to section. The rest of this book is an attempt to provide in detail both the subtle and the recognizable distinctions and something of the body of belief and practice that lies behind them.

## CHAPTER II

### EMPLOYMENT

#### *IN ITALY*

UNEMPLOYMENT came to Italo-Americans during the depression of the 1930's as a new and bewildering problem. Unemployment had not been a concern in the Italy that most of them knew, the far-away homeland. An appeal to a landowner assured any family man both a place to live and the necessities of life, not a living according to American standards but at least an existence. In Sicily, practically everyone had a little piece of land. The South Italian peasant and frequently even the city dweller did not, as in this country, rent or buy a place that had no small parcel of land with it. These practices, plus the fact that Italy is chiefly agricultural, did not give it the permanent load of unemployment now found in such countries as England and the United States.

When the Italian could keep himself occupied in any way whatsoever for the immediate or future gain of his family, however poor the returns might be, he considered that he was accomplishing something. The regard for work for the sake of training and discipline as well as for gain was instilled early in the minds of boys and girls, and its bearing on marriage is noted elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> The following boyhood incident, told by a Lake Como peasant<sup>2</sup> who migrated to this country, illustrates how the fathers in one district applied this principle:

When April appeared and the grass in the mountains was less than one foot high, he used to hire us out to some shepherd across the boundaries, in Switzerland, entrusting us to him throughout the summer. A sack, some poor garments, an alpenstock, and running from

1. See Chapters IV, V, and VI.

2. Quoted by Paul Radin in *The Italians of San Francisco*, San Francisco, SERA Monograph No. 1, Part I, 1925, p. 85.

sunrise to sundown after sheep in the pasture. Nightfall and there came our supper of bread, cheese, milk, then to retire to a bunch of hay, with some more hay for a pillow. At the end of the season, my father used to collect from the shepherd as much as seventy-five lire. Imagine, less than ten dollars for three months of hard work, in dangerous mountains, where every season several boys never came back. But one cannot be a coward when there is dire necessity.

Girls learned sewing and, in country places, weaving and spinning even before their small hands could properly handle the necessary tools. They shared in household tasks, joined their mothers in field work, and even aided in herding smaller animals in sight of home. In fishermen's families, women and girls did much of the work connected with the making and repairing of lines and nets.

The long hours of necessary labor kept the leisure time of Italian children at a minimum. The fact that most South Italians brought relatively few games and pastimes to this country warrants this conclusion, at least for those from the continent. Among the Sicilians, on the contrary, Pitrè<sup>8</sup> found over three hundred games for children of all ages, and Sicilian women in America clearly recollect having spent considerable time at play. It should be remembered, however, that Sicilian women and girls did not as a rule work in the fields.

Little girls usually had to give up playing games at an earlier age than boys. Sewing, spinning, and household tasks kept girls' hands busy, but boys could occupy themselves with small amusements as they watched sheep. Many folk sayings warned that lazy girls do not get husbands. A Calabrian proverb points out that "she who wishes to keep ahead of her neighbor, must go to bed at sundown and get up at dawn." Since certain branches of field work such as weeding and removing stones do not require much strength or skill, both boys and girls of all ages were drafted for these tasks. Even the small amount accomplished by quite young children was frequently so necessary an addition to the family's efforts that they were kept from school for these purposes.

<sup>8.</sup> *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 418.

The authorities of South Italy in particular realized that the enforcement of the so-called compulsory school law might mean the difference between existence and starvation.

Pre-World-War Italy, such statements to the contrary notwithstanding, was far from lacking rudimentary child labor legislation. Such laws either did not apply or were nullified in the case of agriculture. As a wartime writer<sup>4</sup> on the subject concluded:

[Italy] has a fairly complete set of regulations covering factories, mines and building trades. This means that she has dealt with her problem as have other nations, as far as the north is concerned. Like other nations, she has not arrived at any regulations of agriculture. But she is unlike other nations in having her agricultural problem localized so distinctly that inattention to it means inattention to a geographical half of the nation.

The part of Italy in which the most original constructive work is waiting to be done, is this agricultural south kept by historical circumstances in a primitive condition which has little to do with modern systems.

In 1911, therefore, a little less than one half of the children of the nation between the ages of ten and fifteen—1,556,317 of a total of 3,669,814—were employed in gainful occupations.

Legislation governing the work of women made a similar exception of farm occupations. In Sicily alone, "particularly in the interior, a happier age-old tradition has made for the circumscription of women's labor in the fields."<sup>5</sup>

The field wages for men during the years in which emigration was heaviest are typified by the following figures for 1905 for three South Italian provinces:<sup>6</sup>

4. Ruth M. Underhill, "Child Labor in Italy," in *Report of the Commission for Tuberculosis, American Red Cross in Italy*, Rome, Tipografia Nazionale Bertero, 1919, p. 80.

5. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 85.

6. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *Italy Today*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, p. 365; they give the wages in shillings and pence, respectively thus: 1/6, 1/5½, and 1/8; their equivalents at par are given in the text.

	<i>Average hours worked daily</i>	<i>Duration of meal- times in hours</i>	<i>Wages in pay per day</i>
Basilicata	10.7	2.0	\$0.36
Calabria	9.5	2.1	0.35
Sicily	10.0	1.6	0.30

These small returns, small even in terms of commodities, constituted—when contrasted with tales of the wages to be earned in America—one of the chief motivations toward emigration. The average hours of work mentioned appear longer to an American city dweller than to one of our farmers, but they were mitigated by the long rest in the middle of the day, necessitated by the climate, the peasant's slowness, and the frequency and number of holidays. The heat in summer and the heavy, old-fashioned tools so impeded his efficiency that he accomplished little. The Italian calendar contains over two hundred holidays, "and the tenant populace celebrate a majority of them. . . . Only absolutely necessary work is done when holidays and the weather offer the least resistance."<sup>7</sup> The following summary of a normal work day in the life of a Genoese farmer,<sup>8</sup> as he recalled it after coming to America, typifies the average daily experience of an Italian peasant whether in the south or in the north:

The work that had to be done on a mixed farm such as we had was to get up early, around 4 A.M., and have as much done as possible before the sun was too hot. In summer time we went home and slept until three or four o'clock. We then had a vesper and went back to work until night. In winter time when the snow was everywhere we helped to cut wood, tended the cows and horses and sorted seeds. I remember that I never went to school and was never idle as there was work for every one all year round. The most enjoyable time for us children was the autumn time when the fruit had to be brought in.

The retention of primitive, wasteful means of cultivation made the burden of accomplishment appear unbearable to an

7. Paul Radin, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

8. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 76.

observer, and the means of modification, remote. "One may ride hundreds of miles in Italy, through the very finest of farm lands as well as the most forbidding," one writer<sup>9</sup> reports, to illustrate, "and see no hoe that is not far heavier than is needed for its work, and few in which the handle is not so badly fitted as to add materially to the energy required to wield it." This lack of aggressiveness was tied up closely with the general languor of South Italian life, described in the following:

The man and wife with their donkey cart on one of the great public piazzas of Palermo, three cows tied to the rear of the cart and calves tied to the tails of the cows, waiting languidly through the forenoon for customers to come and buy their pitcherful of milk; the bare-footed, sunburned woman, hobbling down some rocky steep with an immense bag of forage on her head for her cow; the weazened farmer plodding homeward in the evening towards the high-perched town, only the head and tail of his little donkey visible from between the great bundles of mingled oats and clover, cut with the sickle of his remote ancestors, and tied carefully together and strapped over the donkey's back; the yoke of big-bodied, long-horned, slow-moving oxen, drawing through the young corn a plow corresponding more nearly to that described in Virgil's *Georgics* than to any cultivator used by the wide-awake corn grower of today.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of adequate roads and means of transportation increased the peasants' burdens not a little. Frequently they had to carry the harvest home on their backs with, at best, the help of the family donkey or cow to bear the heaviest portion. Women often returned home after a long day's work with the fuel for cooking the evening meal balanced on their heads. This fuel consisted of a few sticks of brushwood painstakingly gleaned, partially wrapped in cloth or a piece of sacking. Since many men worked at distances from their homes, they were obliged to leave at three or four o'clock in the morning. When the work was too far away, they returned

9. W. H. Johnson, "The Backwardness of Italian Farming," *The Review*, New York, Vol. I, No. 80, Dec. 6, 1919, pp. 640-641.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 640.

home only on Saturday night. "But," observed an immigrant informant in telling about his early life in Sicily, "in many cases it is only four or five miles each way, and then of course one walks." The scarcity of farm animals and the double duty of cows as sources of both milk and pulling energy, mentioned in the first chapter, aggravated the difficulties of transportation. Human beings not infrequently had to aid in pulling tasks by being harnessed alongside a cow.

The southern tenant farmer usually rented his land from a large landowner under a sharecropping system known as *mezzadria*. Through this arrangement, the landowner agreed "to provide a given number of acres of land, a home, necessary buildings . . . and a certain amount of stock, including hogs, cows, a horse or mule, and poultry." The landlord saw to it that the tenant had "chestnut trees to provide his flour, a certain number of grape vines for his wine, of olive trees for his cooking oil, and of fruit for his table." A description of the system continues thus:

The tenant was expected, from his tract of land, to raise all his food and in many cases the material for his clothing. . . . As each crop was harvested the division was made, half to the owner and half to tenant. Any surplus above his needs, the tenant might sell in order to obtain money for those necessities of life which could not be produced on the farm.

As a result, these tenant farmers, "while having plenty of necessities of life, were denied any of the luxuries." Knowing little else, "they were, for the most part, satisfied." If they lived near a city, "their families would raise their food while the father or mother, or both, worked in a factory."<sup>11</sup> If opportunities for putting aside a little from a surplus were good, too, they might eventually own a piece of land.

Even with the relatively few occupations other than agriculture available to the South Italian, differences of social status marked the various pursuits. Italy's extensive seacoast naturally made fishing the most important industry of the south and the islands. Fishermen, however, ranked consider-

11. Paul Radin, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

ably below peasants in the status scale. A fisherman, for example, knew that custom did not permit him to seek a wife among the daughters of farmers. Peasants gave as their rationalization of this distinction the fact that fishermen knew but one group of skills while peasants were jacks-of-all-trades. In Molfetta, in Apulia, "somewhat of a primitive society," an immigrant author<sup>12</sup> states that "certain types of work, especially all forms of manual labor, . . . are considered below the dignity of the best families." A German writer<sup>13</sup> illustrates the point with the following Sicilian incident:

Our washerwoman, having cut her finger, sent her daughter secretly in her place, but begged us on no account to let it be known that her Angelina was earning money in this way, because her engagement (to a carpenter) would certainly be broken if he heard of it. . . . So it appears that a girl of this ordinary tradesman class is thought to lower herself by work.

This student of Sicilian customs also notes thus the manner in which differences in dress labeled these class distinctions:

The women engaged in manual work may not wear hats, and this is extended even to the daughters and wives of tailors and shoemakers, who however do occasionally appear in hats on feast days. . . . Under these circumstances they are usually known as "Miss So-and-So" and must on no account be seen with bare feet or carrying water.

The types of work other than farming and fishing into which the average pre-World-War Italian of peasant origin might go, fell into three groups. He might enter the ranks of the traveling artisans (*mestieri girovaghi*), of the peddlers (*venditori ambulanti*), or of the small shopkeepers. He usually adopted the more technical of these vocations, especially barbering, tailoring, carpentering, and shoemaking, by the

12. C. M. Panunzio, *The Soul of an Immigrant*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1921, p. 45.

13. Alexander Rumpelt, *Sizilien und die Sizilianer*, Berlin, Allgemeine Verein für Deutsche Litteratur, 1902, p. 88.

way of the apprenticeship system. A boy who had completed schooling sufficient for the future betterment of his family (rather than of himself individually) was sent to a master craftsman to learn a trade. He spent the first months of his apprenticeship cleaning and sweeping the shop and running errands, as frequently for the master's wife as for the master. For his services, the boy received his board and room and, between chores, an informal exposure to a group of skills.

A barber in America who owns a large business with many men under him said, in speaking of his childhood in Italy, that at the age of twelve he shaved his first customer. "My hand shook so," he recalled, "that I was afraid of cutting his face, but nothing happened. And when my master returned and I told him, he was pleased. From that time on I was allowed to take a few customers until I became a practiced hand." The incident occurred while his master was out of the shop during the siesta hour.

The *mestieri girovaghi* included chiefly workers in metal and leather, repairers of clocks, and others of considerable skill who usually made rather than repaired goods and who traveled from town to town. They thus commanded a higher return for their labors than the humbler tinkers and cobblers, the *venditori ambulanti*, who confined their efforts to one village or town. While tailors and dressmakers usually sought work only in their own towns, the intricacies of their trades placed them in the former category.

Tailors and dressmakers went from house to house and sometimes lived with the families for whom they worked. These artisans did the cutting and fitting, the aspects of clothesmaking that required the greatest skill, and the women of the household then assisted in finishing in order to save money by speeding the work. Italian peasant women, however poor, did not as a group make their own clothes but always had to have a trained woman (*maestra* or *padrona*) at least lay the work out for them. In poor families and sometimes even in the middle classes, parents minimized the cost of such services by arranging for one daughter to learn the

dressmaking trade, even if only for the service of her own family. This division of labor was also found in another branch of household industry, weaving; a specialist did the preliminary work of setting up on the loom the more elaborate patterns.

These workers, like many others, at times had to take their pay in produce, but to this rule the women's hairdresser formed a unique exception. In return for a few *soldi* (cents) a month, this woman went daily to the homes of her clients to brush, comb, and arrange their hair. The Neapolitan called her *La Capera* and looked forward to her coming eagerly because she brought with her the village gossip. The fact that the hairdresser never washed her clients' heads recalls the discussion of water in the preceding chapter. Italian women believed not only that a cold resulted from washing the hair but that water would remove the natural oil necessary to the hair's health. This may have some connection with the rarity of dandruff in Italy, a situation on which Italian women in this country frequently comment.

Small shopkeepers each represented one of a legion of specialties, and each displayed a distinctive sign—frequently in a design dictated by hoary tradition—before his little shop. These included herb sellers, cobblers, locksmiths, tobacconists, midwives, horseshoers, who also served as veterinarians, and old clothes sellers, with “a skirt or pair of trousers from some very questionable source”<sup>14</sup> hanging over their doors, charcoal- and straw-dealers, and men who rented leeches. The last, an interesting survival, advertised their wares with a sign depicting a Tunisian holding out a leech in a bowl and with others sticking to his legs. The midwife’s sign, also of great antiquity, pictured the old bench used by women in labor and this symbol, ☽○☽, said to be of Greek origin, representative of the “egg of life” between the vulvae. The tavern keeper, seldom with more than one or two dark rooms in which to sell wine, displays one of a variety of captions on his sign. Here are some from Sicily:<sup>15</sup>

14. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, p. 805.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 862.

Bona vinu.

*Good wine.*

Senza viulinu.

*Without a violin (on which to play its praises).*Quando questo gallo canterà,  
Allora credito si farà.*When this cock crows,  
Credit will be given.*

Amici, vieni e penza.

*Friends, come and think!*

Cortesia, non credenza.

*Courtesy, not credit.*

La credenza è pazia.

*Credit is sheer folly.*

Amici, bevano e vanno via.

*Friends, drink and go in peace.*

Street peddlers, the *venditori ambulanti*, were if anything more specialized than the small shopkeepers, as the following list—adapted from Pitrè<sup>16</sup>—of things and services thus bought and sold indicates:

Water	Seedling plants	Eggs (by women)
Green vegetables	Seeds	Fans (such as are used in place of bellows)
Silver polish	Herbs	(by women)
Brass polish	Rags	Pots and pans
Strawberries	Cat-skins	Needles and pins
Prickly pears	Pot mending	Courier service (by women)
Octopi	Cobbling	
Broccoli	Umbrella mending	
Milk	Spoons (by women)	

The trades of some of these workers, notably those of the herb peddler, the cat-skin peddler, and the courier, have sufficient significance to merit particular description. For a meager reward, the herb peddler had to gather his extensive stock from the most inaccessible places in the mountains in all sorts of weather. He frequently adopted snails as a sideline in the autumn and cried thus the addition to his wares: "Here is a little dish for you that is still sleeping," that is, that is as fresh as possible. "Who has cats?" shouted the cat-skin man. "Who has cats in return for a nice rabbit skin?" Hearing his call,

16. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

the women brought out their cats, mangy ones, ones that have wandered into their homes, and sick ones. Before he could drop one of the little beasts into his sack, he had to work out a compromise between the inflated evaluation of the housewife and his own scepticism. "I have a fine little cat," he then alleges in his singsong tone and finally resells the creature at a profit by reversing the purchase procedure. This man also handles the skins of rabbits, sheep, and goats which, after dressing, become bed covers, men's coats and leggings, or a kind of vest to protect women's chests in the winter. The woman courier, a person of the lower class, did errands for those ladies for whom custom decreed it unseemly to be seen in the shops or bargaining on the streets. She delivered letters, sold garden produce or eggs in a small way, and performed any other sort of commission for her clients. She was found particularly in Sicily, Calabria, Basilicata, Campania, and Apulia.

The multiplicity of small trades explains in part the absence of trade unions in this part of Italy before the World War. Standardization of any kind was out of the question. In order to make even the barest living, the peddler was obliged to sell his whole stock; hence he felt that he had to lower his prices as the day went by and the number of his buyers diminished. He even humiliated himself to the point of accepting whatever was offered. The following incident involving a cobbler of Palermo, described by Pitrè<sup>17</sup> as "the traditional type of poor workman, par excellence," illustrates the peddler's attitudes and problems:

"Here comes the cobbler," cries the man as he goes round the streets with his basket of tools on one shoulder and a small portable bench on the other. "Come and have your shoes mended." An answer comes, one that brings money, but how little money! . . .

"Mend these shoes for me," says a woman presenting him with the remains of two old shoes belonging to her son, a mere ragamuffin. The cobbler quickly measures out some shapeless mass of sole and vamp and proceeds to put it together, barely stopping to take a

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

breath. The woman is not satisfied and begins to abuse him roundly. "Just look at the man, has he so much money that he can scamper through his work? He can't fool me with his grand airs." "I have neither money nor airs," he answers, "but how can you expect anything else from such rotten things, just two pieces of leather, full of holes?"

"Oh well!" she replies, "I will pay according to the work. Put half soles on these rotten things as you call them, and we will see what I will pay you."

The wrangling continues until the work is completed and the stipulated amount collected. "Compared with him," notes Pitrè, "the village shoemaker is a lord."

Apparent satisfaction with such humble types of labor forms one of the main points of antagonism between the southerners and their northern brothers. On this account, the North Italians both in Italy and in this country accuse the South Italians of being traditionally content with low economic conditions and outmoded ways of living. This antagonism becomes another of the many factors that slow up the process of assimilation into the American population and even of the integration of Italian interests in America.

#### *IN AMERICA*

WITH these notions before us of the economic ways of life that our Italian immigrants followed in their homeland, the effects of the change in physical and cultural environment become more understandable. The change of climate and the new and rapid movement of life that places such a great strain on men in America necessitate drastic adjustments in the Italian's leisurely scheme of life. The attendant maladjustments furnish social workers with many acute problems.

Because of their background and of the severe winters in this country, many Italians do not expect to work during the cold months. Their families must, therefore, live on a minimum during the spring and summer in order to put enough aside to last through the lean months. Lucky are those with children old enough to work or with wives whose training in

the old country makes it possible for them to obtain jobs in dress shops and who can leave their children with relatives or even neighbors. "Italians," observes one writer,<sup>18</sup> "are to an uncommon degree coöperative. They are the only people . . . who make no charge for watching over a neighbor's child while its mother is away at work." When questioned, the people merely say that in Italy one did not find the husband hunched over the stove in the winter idling because Italy gave him scope for his activities and a climate suitable for carrying them on throughout the year. No Italian peasant, too, could ever earn enough nor could his family as a whole to enable him to stop working for three or four months a year. To attribute his inactivity to laziness merely supplies an oversimple explanation. The demands for a rapid improvement in a family's standard of living, in view of the slowness with which a man may increase his income, as frequently breed discouragement as a determination to push ahead.

An immigrant's wife and children soon develop the desire for better clothes, furniture, and even living quarters. The community nurse suggests firmly and persistently that his family needs better food. The social worker believes that his wife and children should belong to some club or other, with its dues and assessments for picnics, suppers, and what not. The father who tries to meet these needs dons three or four sweaters with the first show of frost and struggles along with his ditch digging or similarly difficult labor as long as he feels able. In January, he may take sick with pneumonia—a highly prevalent illness among these immigrants and one apparently more often fatal to them than to native Americans. If he is a factory worker, on the other hand, it is not unlikely that he will be laid off. In joining the long lines of those seeking employment, he not infrequently develops pneumonia just the same from the long waits in the wet and cold. One cannot help but think that perhaps after all the stove-clinging husband shows greater farsightedness than might appear at first glance. These possibilities are not based on isolated

18. R. F. Foerster, *op. cit.*, p. 890.

incidents. The cold New England winter quietly but insidiously takes its toll in both life and money. These people spend relatively far more on fuel and warm clothing than do Americans, both because their houses are often less well insulated against the cold and because, not being conditioned to the climate, they feel the necessity for greater heat. This statement refers not only to the first generation but to the two successive ones as well, who reflect the mental attitudes and physical traits of their parents. Such conditions point to the desirability of a steady, fairly well-paid job for the South Italian.

Certain men never adjust to factory labor even though they can find no other satisfactory occupation to which to turn. Some scrape together a little capital and then embark upon one small enterprise after another in an effort to establish themselves permanently on a firm footing, but failure dogs them and their debts pile higher and higher. Others work in factories or lumber or coal yards for years and then suddenly give up and are found in their homes complaining of a vague indisposition with no apparent physical basis. Their fundamental problem is that, despite their years of struggle, they have never been able to adjust to the high pressure of the American industrial system and can no longer spur themselves to the point of meeting the heavy demands made upon them. Still others began, after years of excellent work, to have frequent minor accidents. One man had recurrent injuries to his hands over a period of three years, simple finger lesions that did not involve anything permanent. Each time he was laid off on sick insurance. Although he exhibited as much eagerness to work as ever upon his return, the same thing would occur again after a few months. These accidents invariably took place in the afternoon, a circumstance suggesting that the shortened noon rest may have had considerable bearing on the situation. Eventually, it became impossible to reinstate this man in factory work of any kind. Some relatives then reluctantly hired him to render what help he could in their store and paid him, according to custom, chiefly in goods. The common greeting between Italian workmen,

"Take it easy," reflects this deep-seated resistance to the speed of American industry. Such a remark would have been met in Italy with horror or scorn.

Some men and women depend upon the old ways of earning money, especially during hard times. Many years ago the organ grinder was a common sight on the streets of our cities with large Italian populations. By degrees these itinerant players and their monkeys disappeared. One wondered before the last depression, too, where all the hurdy-gurdies had gone. They were such unwieldy things that they could not be stored in a very small space. In 1930-35, both hand organs and hurdy-gurdies appeared once more. The demand for wares such as those sold in South Italy by the *venditori ambulanti* is met in America, if at all, by the local grocer and "druggist." Ragpicking and metal collecting, controlled mostly by Jews here, are occupations strictly avoided by Italians. These immigrants despise no people more than they do the Jews. Such services as those offered in the old country by the *mestieri girovaghi* meet varied fates in this country. Shoemakers and tailors have trades that they can rather easily adapt to the needs of the new environment and follow in good times and bad. Employers often exploit these artisans, but their pay is still far higher than it was in Italy. Both shoemakers and cobblers, when they accumulate the small capital necessary to set up a shoe repair shop, find in such businesses a greater degree of security and independence. Other former *mestieri girovaghi* find that American mass production methods have destroyed their chances of using their old callings.

Some men find new pursuits so profitable that they do not attempt to return to their old trades, even when it might be possible in this country. They do utilize their knowledge, however, to save expense or to earn a little extra money among their countrymen in their own small locality. One hears that Mr. So-and-So has repaired old Lucia's kettle or that Tony or Sally (short for Salvatore) was in the habit of mending all his children's shoes until a beneficent government took over this burden. While the shifting of the latter burden ap-

pears necessary as a transient expedient, including as it came to do the replacing as well as mending of shoes, this change has tended to become a permanent practice. A privilege thus given in an emergency then becomes a right, jealously claimed and guarded. This transition, which has parallels in such other things as the substitution of a government nursery for the family care of children during a mother's working hours, substitutes public dependence for family independence. The younger generation then grows up with an idea that wherever there is a lack, it is the duty of the government or of some other public agency to fill it.

Certain of the more prosperous men started as hodcarriers, masons' helpers, or in some other unskilled capacity and worked themselves up to positions of wealth and authority as contractors or owners of establishments in the building trades. After a little experience, they generally got started in a small way by borrowing money from a countryman or the bank of a *paesano*. When an Italian finds that he has a chance to obtain wealth, he becomes intensely ambitious to attain a position of comparative ease and comfort. The group has thus gained economic status through business more rapidly and more frequently than through the professions even though it has produced a number of physicians and lawyers of considerable fame.

*Campanilismo*, the intense regionalism of their Italian background, continues to exercise in this country much of its old force among workers employed in groups. Like many other cultural traits of a similar order, it came definitely to the fore during the depression of the 1930's, especially in the governmental work enterprises for the unemployed. In praise of Mexican railroad laborers, a western trackmaster<sup>19</sup> exclaimed, "They don't have feuds and disorders like the Italians, who are always fighting unless the whole gang is from the same town in Italy." This recalls the discussion of this subject in the preceding chapter. As an excuse for not enlisting in the Civilian Conservation Corps, Italians frequently said that the work was too hard or that they were

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 898-894.

sick. The real reason, however, seldom divulged, was that their parents feared they might meet and marry girls from some other part of Italy, or worse, some non-Italian; that South Italian boys could not stand the cold of a reforestation camp during winter in Maine; or that they knew they would find the American diet at the camp unpalatable. Even though a boy's family might desperately need the income they would receive through his C.C.C. employment, they would rather find excuses than chance these dangers. Among those who did join the Corps, inexplicable walkouts for apparently trivial reasons frequently occurred.

The functioning of religious taboos in the work sphere may be illustrated by the belief that during a woman's pregnancy it is dangerous for her or her husband to work on Sant' Aniello's day (December 14). This idea is held chiefly by certain Neapolitan groups.

A French foreman noticed that two or three of his men were absent from work on this day. They all sent messages that they were ill. The next day, however, they all returned looking hale and hearty. By judicious questioning, he learned something of the belief, and the personnel department took cognizance of it. The following folk rhyme from San Salvatore Telesino Benevento states one penalty for breaking this taboo:

Chi lavora al giorno di Sant' Aniello  
Fa un ragazzo senza vudello.

He (or she) who works on Saint Aniello's day  
Will have a child without a belly.

The following incident demonstrates the actual influence of the taboo: A man who worked in a fish market belonging to an American worried a long time as the fetish day approached. He was torn between fear for his unborn child and for his means of livelihood. Not wanting to lie, he finally decided to risk going to work. As he was busy handling some lobsters, a *paesano* remarked, "Why Mike, I no think to see you work today." Mike, terror stricken, threw a lobster at the man. As he told his wife afterwards, if the friend had not

talked so loudly, the saint might not have noticed his sin. The birth of his child with a red mark on his face convinced the father that that was the price he had paid for his sin.

Except for farm families, problems surrounding the employment of children take on entirely new aspects in America. In the country, with its numerous farm tasks and opportunities for occupation, fewer adolescent maladjustments result. In the cities, too, the careful supervision by parents of the employment of girls minimizes delinquency among them. Since the "proper place for a young girl is at home with her mother," few Italian girls take positions as domestic servants. When they do, it is only with a family where the mistress is well known to the parents and assures them of careful supervision of their treasure. Crowded in three- or four-room homes, however, perplexed parents find the question of occupation for growing daughters increasingly difficult. Sons can go out to look for work, even though that business not seldom degenerates into standing on street corners with other would-be employees. "I knew a lot when I was your age," a mother snaps at her daughter; the mother has occupations in mind that industrial America has taken from the home. The girl, knowing that her mother cannot read and write, makes a sarcastic rejoinder. The mother, ready for marriage at a younger age than her daughter has reached, sighs, and wonders that the world can change so completely. School, she thinks, teaches children much but somehow fails to instill the most important obligations of life—a realization of the necessity of work and a will to do it. Many who do work, on the other hand, no longer wish to give their entire earnings into their mother's safekeeping. American girls need at least two hair-wavings a month, new clothes, movies, and trips to the shore. "It is my money," they assert, and therein lies the greatest change. Wages used to be used jointly for the common support of the family; now they tend to remain in the possession of the girls and boys who earn them. Another issue is thus created by the conflict between young and old.

Juvenile delinquency becomes an acute problem among

South Italian boys in congested and underprivileged urban areas. When these adolescents are not working, they find that facilities for recreation are limited. American cities furnish parks and playgrounds, but Americans do not realize that South Italians insist on boys and girls being kept apart in recreation as in work. In search of outlets for their energies, the antisocial activities of gangs appear.

The difficulties connected with the South Italian's search for a livelihood, a sketch of which is now before us, bear an integral relationship to the whole social structure of the immigrant group. While this and other aspects of his culture are presented under convenient headings in the chapters of this book, the separation of the whole into parts should never be regarded as more than arbitrary. In this chapter, religious practices, sex mores, and other customs have necessarily entered the discussion. In the subsequent treatments of family life and religion, to mention but two, the conception of the economic activities of the South Italian is somewhat amplified.

## CHAPTER III

### HOUSING

#### *IN ITALY*

THE variety of structures that housed the poor in South Italy reflected the peasants' skill in adapting the materials at hand. In the vicinity of Naples, the peasants frequently used lava. In Sicily, stones from ruined Greek temples were assembled in combinations that would have shocked their designers. Sometimes a single tomb served as a complete dwelling in itself, with the sarcophagus transformed into a bedstead. Some of these peasant homes early in the twentieth century included dwellings so unsanitary and (especially in Basilicata) so dilapidated that the central government made a test survey in 1910 in the Vittoria (Sicily) region to determine the nature of the problem. Pitrè<sup>1</sup> summarized the parliamentary report on the peasant houses surveyed as follows:

The single narrow room with a small entrance represents the lowest grade. The floor of such dwellings is on a level with the ground, and is unpaved. At best, the furniture consists of five or six chairs, two beds, an oven, a stove, a manger for the donkey which is housed with the family, and finally a heap of manure in the corner. The next type of house is only a slight improvement on the first. It is equally small but has a paved floor, a loft reached by a small wooden staircase, underneath which is a bed with a single straw mattress. The furnishings consist of a few home-made seats, a table, pitcher, basin, cooking-pot, frying pan, a terra-cotta drain, and a broom.

As the economic condition of the family improved, changes appeared. They might pave the floor with brick or stone; they might even have two rooms, of which one was used as the kitchen and general living room. Unless the family became

1. *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 76.

so well-to-do that it could afford a separate building for the animals, the manger remained in the house.

The recollections of an American immigrant<sup>2</sup> who came from a North Italian farm in Asti, Piedmont, sharpens our picture of the peasant's dwelling:

Our home, which we rented, consisted of one large room, where the whole family slept and lived, a small kitchen, and adjoining the kitchen a room used for the cow. During the winter, which lasted about four or five months a year, we kept the cow in there at all times. The cow-dung was piled up against the wall in order to keep the warmth in and the cold out. Right over the cow we arranged a floor or platform of common lumber, where we all slept as it was warmer there, heat coming from the cow. This was the condition there as long as I can remember and up to the time I left for this country.

A peasant<sup>3</sup> from Scala in Campania relates that the homes in his native district "were very simple, consisting in almost all instances of but two rooms and never having chimneys." While in "rare cases charcoal was burned in braziers," heat came mostly from "wood, burned openly, and the smoke allowed to seek its own way out." Another informant<sup>4</sup> states that in the homes of the *contadini* (peasants) washing facilities were meager and drainage absent, that olive oil or petroleum might be burned but that "many a family has its evening meal in darkness."

Peasants employed at too great a distance to return home each night lived in a mere shack for some months of the year. Shepherds, leading a more or less nomadic life, also occupied straw shelters of a most temporary character. This type of adjustment applied to both the women and the men of these groups.

2. Quoted by Paul Radin in *The Italians of San Francisco*, San Francisco, SERA Monograph No. 1, Part II, 1935, p. 181.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-128.

4. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 94.

The straw-hut for about a meter above the ground is built of primitive brickwork, for the sake of dryness. The joints are stopped up with mud, and where the brickwork ends, the sides are continued in a conical form. They are made of straw, and covered with leaves or litter. The floor is sometimes paved with stones; more often there is merely the bare earth. The interior of these huts measures about four or five square meters, and for the most part the floor space is filled with pads on which the women sleep. The hearth is constructed of four stones placed in a square, over which is suspended a pot fastened to the roof of the hut. These huts are set up near each other, for the Sicilian people are sociable, and the women especially would not know how to live without seeing each other, talking and working together.<sup>5</sup>

The peasant structures were "placed generally in a town upon an elevation, those of the more wretched day laborers . . . being on the periphery."<sup>6</sup> An inhabitant<sup>7</sup> of Abruzzi, a state considered by some as belonging to Central Italy, characterized a town thus:

Near a broken-down church are about a hundred one-story houses irregular and misshapen, blackened by time and crumbling away from wind and rain, their roofs ill-covered by tiles and rubbish of every kind. Most of these hovels have only one opening, which serves as doorway, window, and chimney flue. In the unfloored interior with its dry walls live, sleep, eat, and procreate together on the straw matting men, women, and their children, donkeys, pigs, goats, and chickens.

City housing facilities in the Italy from which most Italo-Americans emigrated usually consisted for poor families of only one room. Even this, however, was a much larger apartment than is yet to be found among the poor in America. Sometimes, too, in Italy as in this country, the single room

5. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, p. 81; from the parliamentary inquiry mentioned above.

6. R. F. Foerster, *op. cit.*

7. Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara*, New York, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1934, p. vii *seq.*

sheltered more than one family. With no other arrangement practical, curtains or partitions separated the living quarters of adolescent children and other relatives from those of the mother and father. Lacking this expedient, adolescents were frequently sent to sleep with relatives. In the country, when possible, boys and men slept in a little outhouse or barn. In city homes, second-floor rooms were called the *piano nobile* (aristocratic floor). On that elevation, one was "free to live at leisure without fear of being overlooked." Below, "all the evils are encountered that one can possibly imagine," conditions that evolved this pointed saying:

Casi di susu, casteddi.

Casi di jusu, gunneddi.

Upper floors, castles.

Lower floors, petticoats.<sup>8</sup>

An ancient type of stone house found in the cities of Sicily, called the *catoju*, had but one opening or window over the door. While this sort of construction—like others mentioned above—may strike Americans as unhealthy, it is well to remember that the dark cool *catoju* offered a retreat from the heat of the Sicilian summer that a better ventilated habitation might not furnish. Pitrè,<sup>9</sup> even though a physician, did not wholly condemn these gloomy dwellings; he describes thus the manner in which both peasants and *catoju* dwellers adapt their lives to the limitations of their houses:

The restricted space and the lack of air speak for themselves, because the peasants, and not only the peasants, but the city-dwellers as well, practically live out of doors. This is true also of the inhabitants of the large villages, who have not sufficient room to move around, or enough light to work inside the house. When the season permits (probably about nine months of the year), they rest outdoors as well. Here the men (never the women) sleep at night, and here

8. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, Palermo, Luigi Pedone Lauriel, 1880, Vol. VIII, p. 217.

9. *Op. cit.*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 89.

they talk or work during the day. Here the women dress their hair, turning their backs to the passers-by, here the housewives do the washing when they do not take it to the river or lake, and here they cook, mend, chatter and tell tales, and accomplish many household tasks.

From observing the housing conditions described, travelers in Italy often concluded that the peasants were not fastidious about cleanliness. Considering the inadequacy of the water supply and the primitiveness of household sanitary facilities, however, the South Italian did quite well. Of the Sicilians, it was said that the "way women keep the house in order, and as far as possible clean, is nothing short of marvelous."<sup>10</sup> The restricted space, the passing in and out of the family over an earthen floor, and the presence of animals in the house stimulated rather than discouraged the development of tidiness in the women. Their tolerance of animals reflected their high value to their owners and the costliness of outbuildings and fences. These considerations led to such solicitude for the welfare of the animals that "certain judges accused the peasants of thinking as much of their live stock as they did of their own flesh and blood."<sup>11</sup> Saturday is a day of general cleaning. No woman lets it go by without washing or otherwise cleaning the floor all over, scalding all utensils, cleansing the table, and polishing the copperware. The emphasis laid on the customary use of this day is illustrated by the expression, *fari sabbatu* (to make Saturday), which means "to give a general cleaning." The inside walls of the houses were whitewashed each year, in preparation either for the feast day of the village's patron saint or for some other solemn occasion. The Sicilians sum up the spirit of these practices in the adage, "*Povira sì, lagnusa pirchi?*" ("You may be poor, but why be dirty?").<sup>12</sup>

Since the house served primarily as a sleeping place, the bed was its most important piece of furniture. In South Italy the mattress, and in Sicily the whole bed, was the responsi-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

bility of the bride. Among the poorest the mattress was stuffed with cornstalks. Those who could afford it used wool. Beds were sometimes so high that a stool was needed to climb into them. Some consisted simply of planks laid on a framework. Other arrangements are mentioned above in other connections. The women often fastened a piece of embroidered linen in a deep frill around the legs of the bed's framework to improve its appearance. Even with more attractive woodwork in better homes, this *turnialettu* (valance) still appeared, its original purpose forgotten. In many parts of South Italy, peasants' beds were much larger than the modern American double-bed standard; they often had to accommodate not only the parents but their more or less numerous offspring. The children either slept at the foot or were arranged with the girls on the mother's side and the boys on the father's. In Sicily an old law threatened excommunication to parents who permitted adolescent children to sleep with them. Although this application of the incest taboo has long since lost such formal backing, the mores enforce its strict observance. In Sicily, even the baby never sleeps with its parents, and indeed any family can manage to contrive a cradle of the type used. This is a simple hammock slung between two wooden horses. The poor seldom had curtains or blinds, but they sometimes used a sort of wooden shutter to screen the window. Even without this, however, the dwellings were usually dark enough for both the noon siesta and the nightly rest.

Folk sayings and beliefs furnished ready rationalizations of such crude sleeping facilities. The Sicilians followed this line of reasoning: "Sleep is the ordinance of God, who has made night to follow day. Weariness brought on by toil does not need a pillow, neither does hunger need an appetite." By tradition, sleep was related to death. The state between sleeping and waking was called the sleep of a cat. A person in this condition could be roused at the touch of a fly, but one in a sound sleep would not waken "even if an egg is fried on him." The heavy sleeper was considered stupid, but cautious people

slept "with their eyes open." Bringing these and other notions together, a folk rhyme asserts,

Three hours for saints,  
Five for merchants,  
Seven for most people,  
And nine for the fool.

The first sleep, known in many European countries as "the beauty sleep," was thought best of all.<sup>18</sup> To assure safety during the mysterious nocturnal state, a vessel containing holy water, a crucifix, or the statue of a saint usually hung over the head of the bed. Somewhere in the dwelling, too, the patron saint of the region was invariably represented.

House rent, other than that included in *mezzadria* contracts, discussed in the preceding chapter, was paid by the year. When a tenant did not earn enough money, his landlord, who generally kept a store for the purpose, permitted payment in farm produce or other goods. Sometimes a part of the sum due was paid in work. The low margin of security in South Italy thus was assured in an elastic fashion in this as in other regards. If obligations could not be met in one way, another method could usually be found.

One might think that the vast outpouring of emigrants from Italy indicated that South Italians had lost their passion for their homes and their homeland. But in the foreign land the memory of the poor huts where they were born and grew to maturity still lives in their minds and fills them with sad longing. The Sicilians say, with simple fervor, "*Cazussa mia, fuculareddu miu!*" ("My little cot, my fireside!") The Tuscan version is the same in effect: "*Casa mia, casa mia, per piccina che tu sia, tu mi sembri una badia.*" ("My home, my home, however small you may be, to me you are as fine as a castle.") Among Sicilians, the only songs heard in the new country are those of the exile who thinks of his mother, longs to be at her side once more, and pours out this lament:

18. Giuseppe Pitre, *op. cit.*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 189.

Goldfinch, who can fly away at will,  
Go to my home, you know the way well.  
Greet there for me my home and my friends,  
Take this letter to my mother,  
And if she weeps, tell her that I too weep,  
Thinking how strange it is that I am in this far-off land.<sup>14</sup>

Sentiment plays a powerful rôle in keeping tied to their native soil even those who realize the economic advantages that might come from emigration.

*IN AMERICA*

AMERICANS are apt to deplore the housing conditions of poor Italians in the United States without taking into account the problems incident to the transfer from one country to another. Running water, more space, and more adequate means for disposing of refuse constitute striking improvements over crowded one-room dwellings shared with donkeys and chickens and surrounded by streets full of waste. But these elements in his new domestic environment do not compensate the Italian for the unaccustomed loneliness and strange usages of the more complex American civilization and for the climatic extremes of northern United States. The conflicts arising from these changes represent the greatest obstacles to his adaptation. Since the South Italians naturally cling to the outstanding features of their old ways of life, especially group living, those who work among them need a thorough knowledge of methods of compensating them for what they have lost. As the *Report of the Commission for Tuberculosis, American Red Cross in Italy*,<sup>15</sup> put it in 1919, "Italians who dwell in the most sanitary and most completely equipped of our American city tenements may yearn to feel the weight of the clothes baskets or the water urns that formerly necessitated their going to the common meeting place."

One of the chief objectives of the Italian in this country is

14. Giuseppe Pitre, *op. cit.*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 89.

15. Article by Mildred Chadsey, "Housing in Italy"; Rome, Tipografia Nazionale Bertero, 1919, p. 121.

to own his home. He lives under the most cramped and sordid conditions to save the money necessary for the down payment. After years of patient toil on his part and of economizing on his wife's, granted that the climate and other aspects of his new environment have not brought about too many health problems, he may be able to pay \$500 or \$1,000 on a small home, the full price of which is some \$5,000 or \$6,000. Here he joyously settles down with two or even three mortgages on his shoulders for the rest of his life and perhaps even that of his heirs. But he has a home. He has become a *padrone* (landlord), a status far beyond his hopes in Italy. He has attained the prestige that the coming to America promised him, a prestige worth all the sacrifices and losses entailed. If the house is a two-family dwelling, he leases the first floor and occupies the *piano nobile* (aristocratic floor). The garden space, however, he generally retains and crams full of vegetables and vines. Vines furnish wine and provide a pleasant place to perform household tasks and to entertain in the summer. They thus bring back something of Italian life.

Those immigrants who have not become property owners rent rooms where possible from their own *paesani* or better still, from their own relatives. In such cases, assistance with children and housework is interchanged, much visiting back and forth takes place, and in times of economic distress supplies are given and money lent. Lacking such neighbors, a woman from Palermo would rather walk five blocks to visit a *paesana* than spend her time across the hall with her neighbor from Sorrento. These renters, reflecting the common love of gardens and desire to raise a crop, utilize to the fullest whatever land they may obtain. One family living on the third floor has a luxuriant vine that spreads over their old wooden porch. The stock was coaxed from a bit of ground not more than a foot square, far below, by deft pruning and cultivation.

Many South Italians who came to America around 1890 and 1900 settled in cities, whereas North Italians took up truck gardening or more extensive farming. This choice de-

pended on the economic resources of the two groups. The North Italian more frequently brought money with which to buy land on his arrival. This the southerner lacked, and by the time he had saved enough to go back to farming his American-born children insisted upon remaining city-dwellers. These second-generation southerners constitute the bulk of Italian urban population. They may live, when newly married, in only two rooms, but they move as their families grow into four- and five-room apartments or flats or, when prosperous, even into single-family houses. Families of the same local origin in Italy (*paesani*) tend to live in the same parts of town and, generally speaking, North Italians live in sections distinctly separated from those of the southerners. Great prosperity and success, however, often cause members of both groups to penetrate the more generalized American quarters of the towns.

Mothers so inculcate orderliness and cleanliness into each Italian girl that American visitors are constantly filled with admiration at the neatness and attractiveness of the small apartments. This impression depends, of course, upon the facilities and the means; after all, statements to the contrary notwithstanding, cleanliness does cost money. However dingy the outside of the blocks of brick or wooden houses may appear, brightly colored linoleum covers the kitchen floor, dainty light curtains hang at the windows, and beds have spotless counterpanes. If there is a sitting room, it is commonly furnished with a three-piece suite of cheap pattern but with highly polished wood and well-brushed cloth surfaces. Wherever anything unsightly may be in the kitchen or pantry, the traditional valance conceals it. These disguise the washing machine, the under part of the sink, and even the gas meter. Since the valance is used particularly by Sicilian and Calabrian families and sometimes by Neapolitan, its presence furnishes one guide to the origin of the family.

Instead of the bed and mattress being the obligation of the bride in this country as they were in Italy, girls who have gone to work on leaving school frequently accumulate enough to buy not only the bed and mattress but one or more rooms

of furniture as well. They accomplish this either by turning their earnings over to their mother according to custom or by personal savings. Many brides of the first generation, however, brought their mattresses with them to this country. These women keep up the custom of having them taken apart and the stuffing shaken out and aired once a year. Women skilled in this task still go around from house to house as they were wont to do in Italy.

With rare exceptions in New York and other large cities, families no longer live in single rooms in this country. Quite large families, nevertheless, often occupy three or four small rooms. Under such confining conditions, they must use all but one combination living room and kitchen for sleeping. Many of these apartments have little closet room, but their neatness and cleanliness under trying conditions testify again to this deep-seated trait. For the poor, sleeping quarters thus remain crowded with four or five children lying in one bed. The following instance illustrates the problems and the sort of adjustment often made to them:

A mother in an outlying suburb was facing an accouchement in her home. The nurse and physician found their patient lying in state in a large double bed in the only bedroom in the house. Although knowing the woman had several children, the nurse concluded that they were in the care of relatives or friends. Since this incident occurred during the depression years (1931), however, willing relatives could often do no more than share a few meals; almost everyone out of work had had to move into smaller and cheaper rooms. The nurse finally discovered the five missing urchins put to bed some hours earlier under the family bedstead. Italian children may be separated from their parents even temporarily only with the greatest difficulty, and this had seemed to be the only ready solution to the problem.

The frills and ornaments of American homes, such as table covers, runners, curtains and overstuffed furniture, new elements in housekeeping for Italians, impose a greater burden upon first-generation immigrants than upon their children. While the oldsters would gladly forgo these novelties, their

worth in the competition for status in the eyes of *paesani* forces their inclusion in the domestic scene. "We had no blinds and no curtains, and the floors were all made of stone," a Sicilian woman fondly recalled. "You have no idea how simple life is over there. Here one must wash two or three times a week; over there once or twice a month." The satisfaction of ownership for ownership's sake rather than for competitive purposes is greatly lessened by the purchase of the articles on an installment basis; before the full price is finally paid, the cheap furnishings are often completely worn out. A couple, situated as were many others, paid \$2,000 for four rooms of furniture in the boom years right after the World War. Although it is old and worn from the ravages of a family of six children, they are still paying for it fifteen years later.

Italians adjust themselves with difficulty to the regular monthly payment of rent in cash. Accustomed to raising gradually and in a variety of ways an annual sum for this time in Italy, they learn but slowly the need of putting aside part of each week's wages for the purpose here. In the case of seasonal workers, the problem becomes even greater. Many American landlords help materially in bridging this deficiency in foresight and the periods of unemployment by accepting work for indebtedness. During the period of unemployment beginning about 1929, however, the habits and needs of these immigrants resulted in a number of trying complications. While the savings of many families enable them at first to buy food, they cannot pay rent. Private and public agencies often find it less expensive to pay rent than to allow clients to go through the process of eviction and rehousing, but the payment of rent develops collusive practices. Several instances occurred in which landlords arranged with their tenants to name a higher rent price than had been paid in the past; they then divided the mark-up. For example, the advance of a man's rent from \$18 to \$20 or \$22 netted landlord and tenant each \$1 to \$2 a month. Among the many landlords and peasants who are *paesani*, the traditional principle of *omertà* (group honor) seals the mouths of both parties in-

volved. Agencies also have unwittingly paid rent to parents for space occupied by young married children. They did not discover the relationship because remarriage had changed the maternal parent's name, marriage had given the daughter a new name, or mistakes in spelling had more or less innocently crept in.

In considering these evidences of deception, like those of other practices defined as antisocial or immoral by our culture, an examination of the Italian's folk premises at their bases should precede the formation of a judgment. Bearing in mind the suspiciousness ingrained in Italian personality by native life-conditions and culture, the ease with which these immigrants rationalize collusion takes on a new perspective. They think it foolish, in view of the many deceptions practiced on them, not to take advantage of that which can be had practically for the asking.

## CHAPTER IV

### DIET AND HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY

#### IN ITALY

**F**OREIGNERS as invariably associate spaghetti with Italians as they do chop suey with the Chinese. Americans who have never "done Europe in three months" know as much about the dish as those who have. In Italy one does not need to know the language beyond the single word to obtain a bounteous meal. "Spaghetti" elicits a culinary response from Milan to Palermo. The belief of foreigners, however, that this is a daily dietary item or that the term covers the variety of substances they label by it reveals their ignorance of Italian and the Italians.

The generic term for the various forms of dough of which tubular ones represent a variety is *pasta*. The kinds of *pasta* the foreigner knows as spaghetti are called by the natives *maccheroni* (macaroni). Spaghetti is just one of a hundred kinds of *maccheroni* and hence of the hundreds of kinds of *pasta*. Other specific names include *vermicelli* (little worms), *lingue di passeri* (sparrow tongues), *canneroni* (big tubes), etc. Some kinds, *ravioli* for example, require a filling and are thus a more expensive dish. Such forms were either unknown or a rare luxury to the southern peasant. The most common type of *pasta* that our Italo-American ate in South Italy was spaghetti. If he lived in the country, his wife made it herself from rye and wheat flour grown on their place, salt, and water. The southern townsman with only a tiny strip of ground often found it cheaper to go to a restaurant—taking his family with him for the chief meal of the day—than to buy the materials for his wife to cook. There he could get a large plateful for two centesimi. More frequently, townspeople bought spaghetti from a street vendor and ate it hot, then and there. The Naples vendor, called *maccaronaro* (macaroni man), was "an artist who works in the open air,"

according to an Italian writer<sup>1</sup> who thus brings the man clearly to our eyes:

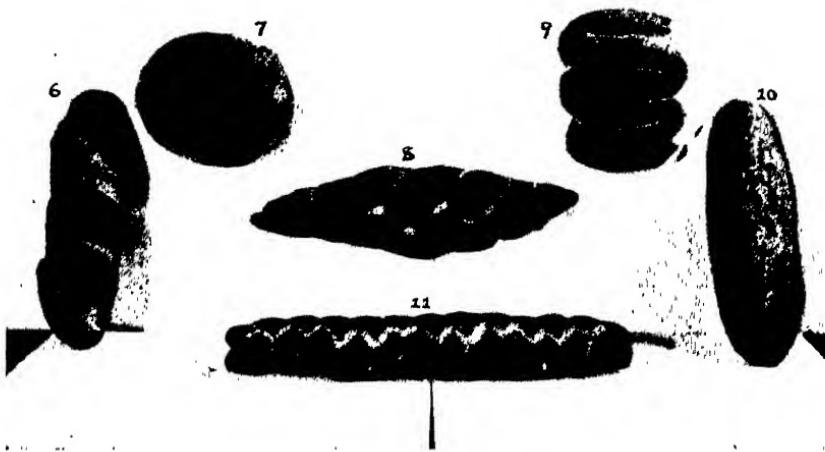
He has two tall stoves on which stand two ample pots forming the front of his booth at the road side. Standing straight up behind, like an orchestra conductor, is our macaroni man. He wears an apron and holds a long-handled ladle. On his right is a bench with a platter of grated cheese, a large pan of tomato sauce, a pile of bowls, and a wooden box of forks. . . . His customers eat on the spot, the richest take cheese and sauce, others only cheese, while the poorest content themselves with a little water from the pot. Everyone eats with a fork.

Spaghetti was used alike in the homes of rich and poor, with a difference in quality. The best was made with *semolina* (a fine flour) and mixed with raw eggs instead of merely water. Regardless of quality, however, the homemade product always rated above the commercial. For variety, it was sometimes cooked with beans, rice, or potatoes. Sauces, like *pasta*, varied greatly, but the most common ingredients were tomatoes and cheese.

Corn meal, another staple, was called by educated southerners *farina gialla* (yellow flour), and by the poor *farina rossa* (red flour), just as they speak of the yolk of an egg as being red. In the south, this item appeared as one of the main constituents of *papochia* (beans boiled to a mush and thickened with corn meal) and of bread, in which it was mixed with rye, chestnut, or coarse wheat flour. The Neapolitans, the chief users of *papochia*, ate it only in the winter. Such corn meal dishes appeared more often on the tables of the poor because of cheapness rather than palatableness. "To the ill-fed peasant it gives a sense of repletion, and he will eat it by preference even when better food is available."<sup>2</sup> Pellagra, commonly connected with the eating of corn meal, plagued the north more than the south. In the north, *polenta* (corn

1. Luigi Ciani, *Il Viaggio per l'Italia di Giannettino*, Florence, R. Bemporade, 1931, p. 828.

2. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *Italy Today*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, p. 128.



*Loaves of bread from the Palumbo Bakery, Elizabeth Street, New York, baked for the Feast of St. Gandolfo. They follow designs used at Palermo, Sicily, birthplace of Mrs. Palumbo.*

1. *Cucciddatu* (ring-shaped).
2. *Cosa minuta a zighizaghi* (small thing with zigzags; the S-shape for *sapienza*, wisdom).
3. *Cosa minuta a fiori* (small thing with flowers).
4. *Cosa minuta a quattru pizzi* (small thing with four pieces; perhaps a survival of a symbol to avert the Evil Eye).
5. *Muffuletti* (probably "little mushrooms").
6. *Bastuni a tri taghi* (club with three gashes).
7. *Panella* (cottage loaf, most common type).
8. *Trizza* (tresses).
9. *Manuzza* (little hand; symbol to avert Evil Eye).
10. *'nciminato* (covered with sesame seeds, much used in Italian cooking).
11. *Marsiglisa* (meaning unknown; like No. 8, representative of plaits; in common with all knotted things, protective against the Evil Eye).



meal made into flat cakes with salt and water) was eaten as bread, not once but two or three times daily, and the people attributed "heating" qualities to it. The summer decline in its consumption, however, correlated with the increasing availability of fresh vegetables as well as with a decline in pellagra. Thus the longer vegetable season in the milder south, rather than the smaller consumption of corn meal, contributed to the comparative scarcity of this deficiency disease.

The Italian peasant of every district regarded white bread as something of a luxury. Its shape and texture varied greatly from district to district, the differences depending largely upon the amount of kneading and mixing. Neapolitan bread had a coarse texture; Sicilian, generally a very fine and close one. Some of the numerous shapes of the loaves were used only on special occasions. The women baked once or at most twice a week because of the scarcity and consequent costliness of the two usual fuels, wood and charcoal. Bread baked with wood was thought to have a particularly tasty flavor. Even when rich, the South Italian much preferred to eat homemade bread rather than any he could buy. The following reminiscence by a peasant immigrant<sup>8</sup> from Scala in Campania characterizes their method of eating bread:

Carrying sandwiches for lunch was unheard of. If bread was taken to the fields it was taken in a very hard "chunk" about as big as a fist. They had no flour (wheat) but used a yellow corn meal mixed with water and a little salt and yeast, into crudely made loaves.

The quantities of vegetables used in the south included lettuce, scarole, chicory, cabbage (savoy), tomatoes, eggplant, onions, artichokes, asparagus, squash, beans of all kinds, potatoes, turnip tops (the turnips are fed to the stock), broccoli, celery, and peas. Carrots and beets were rarely eaten by South Italians; the former appeared in soup only, and the latter, occasionally in salad. Like turnips, beets were commonly considered food for pigs. Among herbs used

8. Quoted by Paul Radin in *The Italians of San Francisco*, San Francisco, SERA Monograph No. 1, Part I, 1935, p. 128.

for seasoning were thyme, basil, mint, parsley, and garlic. The most common fruits were figs, pears, prickly pears, melons, oranges, lemons, persimmons, bananas, strawberries, peaches, grapes, plums, and to some extent apples. Everything that could be eaten raw was preferred in that form. Combinations of two vegetables were common. A popular dish among the very poor consisted of horse beans (*fave*) cooked to a mash, mixed with greens, and seasoned with salt and olive oil. It was known as *fave foglie* (beans and leaves). Its use indicated the economic status of a family. "They are very poor," gossiped the neighbors. "They eat *fave foglie!*"

Nuts, especially chestnuts, figured plentifully in the diet throughout Italy. Chestnuts found many uses besides that of being ground into flour. Peasants of Scala, Campania, for instance, roasted them in ovens in quantities for about twenty minutes and then stored them in sacks. "Both men and women when leaving the house in the morning would carry a pack of these chestnuts and . . . would commence eating them almost immediately and eat almost continuously until the day's work was done."<sup>4</sup>

Separate stores, in general, handled *latticini* (milk products). This term includes butter and various kinds of soft cheeses that resemble the cottage and cream cheeses of America. These cheeses do not keep indefinitely like the hard kinds that hung from ceilings and walls for weeks at a time. The poor practically never had butter on their tables, but confectioners used it in the cakes that were the luxuries of feast days. In the north, however, where olive trees may grow only in sheltered spots, butter and lard take the place of olive oil in domestic cooking. Milk itself was not bottled as in America but went to market in the animal. For little children and the sick, Italians used goat's milk, but many traditional taboos limited the drinking of this or any other animal's milk. They believed, for instance, that milk was poisonous when drunk in conjunction with broth, lemon juice, or wine. "*Latti e vinu, vilenu finu*"<sup>5</sup> ("Milk and wine, fine poison"), an-

4. Paul Radin, *op. cit.*

5. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 162.

nounces a Sicilian proverb. Sicilians believed that milk forms a fertile medium for the development of worms in children. Calabrian peasants held that if one gave a young infant much milk it would take on the characteristics of the animal producing the liquid. Even the poorest woman who could not nurse her own baby managed to find a way to pay a foster mother. South Italians, even when they owned a cow, did not necessarily drink its milk. It was frequently sold to men who collected the supply of an entire community. Of the processing of any milk retained, Paul Radin<sup>6</sup> relates:

After the butter was made it would be shaped into a ball and around that would be placed a crust of cheese about half an inch thick. This would be placed in a cloth bag and suspended from the ceiling in the second room and allowed to hang for about two weeks. The smoke from the fire in the next room, cooled by its travels, would circulate around these cheese balls and in addition to hardening the cheese would impart a very superior flavor to it. The butter thus wrapped in an air-tight container would keep indefinitely.

Sheep's milk always became cheese. The goatherd, too, after taking his animals around the streets in the early morning to sell what he could at house doors, used the remaining milk for cheese.

Beef, veal, and mutton were rare victuals among the poor of the south, but in the north economic conditions permitted more use of them. Ham and sausage were more commonly used by the poor. The many kinds of sausage contained enough herbs and pepper to preserve them for long periods of time. The southerner usually ate his ham, too, in the form of *prosciutto* (smoked ham) which was covered with a thick coating of black pepper. "The pig plays a double role; he is the general scavenger and later killed and made into sausages. The killing of the family pig is one of the big events of the year."<sup>7</sup> The sale of pork, however, was permitted only during the four winter months, December to March. Facilities for preserving meat governed its use to some extent. No refrigeration of any kind was available, and salt was a gov-

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 128.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

ernment monopoly except in Sicily—a situation that minimized its use among the poor through the salt tax. A woman from Piedmonti d'Alife, Campania, recalls that the owner of the sole butcher shop in her town had fresh meat but one day a week, the day on which he slaughtered. The local *Signori* (gentry) bought some at each slaughtering, but the poor and those in smaller towns that had no butcher shop went long periods with little or no fresh meat. A woman from Benevento remembers that her family had meat only on feast days. In Basilicata, the untimely death of a sheep often constituted the only reason for eating meat. The parts that a family could neither eat nor sell at once were preserved in vinegar and salt. When death thus came to an animal, Italians ate more of the inner organs—the lungs for example—than do Americans. The entrails of young nursing calves were considered a delicacy.

Poultry products appeared more frequently than meat on South Italian peasant tables, especially where they raised their own chickens. In many places, chicken broth was considered medicinal rather than nutritive in value. While eggs were mixed at times with spaghetti to increase its food value, the most popular form in which to consume them was raw. They "drank" eggs either alone or beaten into a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. Their eggs had to be quite fresh. They even believed that a newly laid egg acts as a specific against any sickness.

Fish helped to vary the diet in the coastal regions and, where found, in the vicinity of lakes and rivers. The most common sea fish were tuna or tunny, eels, squid, anchovies, and sardines. Eels were as traditionally an Easter dish in Italy as carp in Germany. The whole economy of the Sicilians was, of course, tied up with the tuna-fish industry. In former times, even people imprisoned for debt had to be released for the period of the tuna fishing, their main annual source of livelihood. The fifty tuna stations off the coast of Sicily about 1913 were producing fish worth over one million lire annually.<sup>8</sup> South Italians and particularly Sicilians ate it either

8. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 879.

as an appetizer, in the case of the better classes, or as a flavoring for the otherwise insipid dishes of spaghetti, beans, etc., all of which depended on sauces or condiments for variety. In the inland regions, where fresh fish could not be obtained, the people used dried and salted cod and hake, known as *baccalà* and *stoccafisso* (stock fish). They make these into sauces by soaking and boiling them with tomatoes and oil.

Our Italian immigrants ate a number of items in their native land not commonly regarded as foods in America. Hot red peppers were a favorite addition to any meal, and even bread was frequently flavored strongly with cheese or black pepper. Since mushrooms were a common victual (including many varieties Americans would be afraid to touch), they were hung on strings and dried for winter use. Peppers and eggplant were either pickled or dried. Leguminous and other seeds—chiefly melon and sunflower seeds, horse beans, and chick peas—were dried or soaked in salt water and eaten as Americans do salted nuts. In the salted form, these seeds were usually eaten only on festive occasions.

Italian peasants drank a beverage termed *caffè* which was not made from the coffee bean but from any grain that was roasted and ground and made into a hot drink. Real coffee was too expensive for the poor to buy, and even those who could afford it mixed barley or wheat with a little coffee. The poor most commonly substituted a combination of roasted chicory root and barley for coffee. Barley water, also called coffee, was believed useful in treating stomach trouble and for feeding teething babies. Even infants thus drank so-called *caffè*. Children, as a matter of fact, generally consumed whatever their parents did. The whole family took wine mixed with water (*vinello*) daily, but the men drank it pure only on feast days and Sunday while the women and children used undiluted wine as an occasional treat.

Despite the consumption of wine, drunkenness rarely occurred among the peasants. If an intoxicated man appeared on the streets, parents pointed him out to their offspring as a sad example. Street urchins pursued a drunkard with cries

of scorn. A Sicilian proverb runs, "*La viviri misuratu fa l'omu assinnatu*" ("Unmeasured drinking makes a man an ass"). Wine, thought the Italian, if drunk in moderation, could be a blessing rather than a curse. "Wine," another saying put it, "warms like a mantle."<sup>9</sup> Since fats were believed to counteract the intoxicating effect of alcohol, perhaps the olive oil used so extensively in Italian cooking may have had this effect. Italians, too, did not habitually drink wine with a high alcoholic content nor such liquors as whiskey and gin, except as a rare luxury and in small quantities. Cordials, not infrequently homemade, were the only other common alcoholic drink.

Bringing these elements together, one realizes that the meals of our Italian immigrants were quite simple in their native land. They usually consisted of one main dish, salad or fruit, and bread. The ordinary peasant menu around Naples included bread, cheese, beans, potatoes, greens, salad, and fruit, with *maccheroni* only once or twice a week. In Lombardy, the peasants ate mainly corn bread or *polenta*, coarse macaroni, occasionally a little meat or fish, plenty of onions, garlic, lettuce, olive oil, and chestnuts ground into meal and mixed with wheat flour. In the mountainous regions of Basilicata, where the poorest diet was found, the poor had a breakfast of wheat- or rye-and-potato bread and in addition an onion, some garlic, or a pepper; a midday meal of potatoes or bread with greens and sometimes *baccalà* (dried cod-fish) or cheese; and a supper of soup made of green vegetables and peas or beans. They rarely had meat or eggs. These menus, of course, were altered by the compulsory observance of at least two fast days a week. Even among those who ate meat each week, it was regarded a more deadly sin to eat it on a fast day than to throw it away.

The simplicity of meals, minimizing both preparation and dish washing, left the women relatively free for field work. The scarcity of water, of course, rendered dish washing an even less arduous because less frequent chore. Housewives did not plan their meals far ahead but marketed day by day,

9. *Ibid.*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 158.

largely because they valued freshness and had no refrigeration. Long cooking (despite the opinions of American dietary experts as to its harmful effects upon foods) typified Italian cookery. Its damage to the vitamin content, however, was counterbalanced in the south by the quantities of greens eaten. Italians, like many others not instructed in the subtleties of modern dietetics, even thought that vegetable water had no nourishing value and invariably threw it away. The extensive use of charcoal and of wood—the alternative to charcoal for the peasant and the poor city-dweller—both encouraged lengthy cooking and made it easy. Since charcoal and wood give off distasteful and even harmful fumes, much of the southern cooking took place outside the house. Housewives could thus watch the soup or stew as they went about their other tasks. Several minutes of extra simmering would not alter the final result. In addition to the stove or brazier, every family except the very poor also had an outside oven (*fornello*) for baking. This large structure, built of stone or brick like its American rural counterpart, occupied a corner of either the kitchen, yard, or garden. These outside cooking arrangements furnished another means of bringing female neighbors together into companionship.

Everything that the poor in the remote sections used was homemade. They made their own pots, for example, from common red clay. White clay containers, more expensive because made by more costly methods, were afforded only by the well-to-do. The copper pans and pots in use were often quite old and passed from mother to daughter for generations. Since necessity usually forced the storage of leftover food in earthenware jars, peasants tabooed the employment of metal for this purpose. Although kerosene was used by some, the lamps of the peasants ordinarily contained olive oil made from their own olives. These contrivances often consisted merely of a wick floating in a clay dish of crude oil; the expensive ones were made of tin instead of clay and introduced more refined means of handling the wick. In the more remote rural districts, home industry produced spoons, knives, fans (for bellows), plates, dishes, pots, and pans.

When people could not repair utensils themselves, the traveling tinker (called in Sicily *lu consalemme*) would come to the village sooner or later and do the job. Such men also carried a grindstone on a pole over their shoulders with which to sharpen knives and scissors. Since the silkworm flourishes in Sicily, coarse weaves of silk served as sieves and strainers; wire and metal ones for which Americans pay five cents were unknown.

Winter heat came from braziers filled with charcoal. A small variety of these, known in Sicily as *mariteddi* (little husbands) or *monaci* (monks), were placed by women under their skirts while seated at work. Because southern schools were seldom heated, children carried fire pots to school filled with coals of dried olive pits.

With money rarely employed as a medium of exchange, South Italians had bargaining down to a fine art. "So much wool bartered against so much oil; so much wine against so much flax; and so on."<sup>10</sup> Since the peasants grew a great deal themselves, however, little remained in the way of food to be purchased except a few odd items and luxuries. A potential customer would ask the price of an article by inquiring "How much do you want?" rather than "What is the price?" The sum the owner first stated, after all, was rarely if ever paid. An article was really cheap only when it was got "for nothing" (*per niente*). The seller had an inflection of doubt in his voice when he mentioned his first price, to infer that that figure did not stand above question. His customer then laughed or became angry and left. If the storekeeper was anxious to sell, as he usually was, he played his rôle by running and shouting after his prospective buyer. Little wonder that when a man sought a wife, he considered a good reputation for haggling one of the most desirable traits.

Taking everything into consideration, one must term the Italian very thrifty. He "can save money on the meagre wages of unskilled labor." While "his standard of living is low, . . . it is adapted to his means, and it permits the ac-

10. "Country Life in Italy," *Cornhill Magazine* (London), 1881, Vol. XLIV, p. 605.

cumulation of property."<sup>11</sup> As regarded savings, about 1911 "Campania [land of the Neapolitans] holds the first place in the south, most of the savings of that region being deposited in the provident institutions of Naples."<sup>12</sup> Throughout this and the other parts of chapters in this book dealing with South Italians' old-world background, one thus sees the fashion in which these as other peoples work out expedient adjustments between their biologic and other needs, their ways of meeting those needs, their cultural heritage, and their physical environment.

#### *IN AMERICA*

ONLY with these details in mind can one appreciate the revolution which immigration to the United States effected in household economy. In this country, a higher standard of living enables Italians to include in their diet articles that had previously appeared but rarely or had been completely excluded. Cakes, candy, coffee (the real article), and meat are among the chief of these. Whenever finances permit, these innovations have been adopted wholesale. Used in excess in conjunction with the basic Italian diet, they upset in many instances the dietary balance of the latter. Those who have studied the question carefully believe that the intemperate use of sugar represents the most harmful modification of Italian food habits. In Italy, the per capita consumption of this article was one of the lowest in Europe; the average intake in the United States on the contrary, is the highest in the world. Cake, doughnuts, and sweet buns have become a regular part of the breakfasts of both children and adults. Relations and especially grandparents and godparents are surreptitiously visited on the way from school and wheedled into giving a penny that invariably goes for candy. The child has afterwards no appetite for the heavy but filling meal of spaghetti and sauce that is common among the Italian poor in America, the main repast of the day three or four times a

11. *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Durham, N. C.), July 1905, Vol. IV, p. 222.

12. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, New York, 1911, p. 14.

week. The sweets bring in their train ailments only too familiar to clinical workers and visiting nurses.

A mother gave a five-year-old boy cookies, milk (with coffee), and salted olives for breakfast. Another fed her boy of nine and a girl of six a piece of commercial blackberry pie and a cup of milk for lunch. The milk was taken only after protest. A three-year-old boy's lunch furnishes an extreme example; he sat in a high-chair holding a cup of strong, black sweet Italian coffee with a trace of whiskey in it and dipping doughnuts in powdered sugar before eating them. "My girl," asserted the mother of a six-year-old to the school nurse, "she likes candy." The mother, who had lived in America only three years, did not understand the connection between inordinate candy consumption and underweight; she merely associated her ability to provide candy with a sense of raised social status. An American-born Italian offered in defense of his friend's reputation the statement, "Her father does not permit her candy, of course." Although he did not speak from conviction, he knew the nurse's ideas about candy.

The first-generation Italian wants to live as did his forefathers. This represents security to him. He makes what immediate adjustments he has to, especially in occupation, dress, and living quarters, but will often pay a premium to get some familiar dish. In the search for the same victuals they had eaten abroad, immigrants found that some of their native fruits and vegetables grew or could grow naturally in New England, but others had to be brought from the warmer parts of the country or imported. Merchants established stores stocked with articles shipped over by *paesani* and even relatives of the local Italian community. The basic food habits of Italians have been, therefore, preserved. The modifications that took place represented efforts to emulate practices of the better classes in Italy rather than of Americans. Immigrants even move from one part of a town to another in order to be near a bakery that produces the type of bread to which they are accustomed.

In the new land, the substitution of real coffee for the drink labeled *caffè* has serious consequences. The habit of giving

the new liquid to children, with no knowledge of its changed content, has continued. Milk, like other American foods such as oatmeal, is thought insipid by Italians, but coffee—especially when strongly sweetened—has a definite flavor. Efforts to argue against its use and the employment of excessive amounts of sugar bring one face to face with the popular theory that children—like animals—know instinctively what is good for them. If one forces a child to eat something he does not like, the women assert, he will become ill. "'E no like," thus is offered as a valid reason for refusing to follow dietary recommendations. Upon discovering that social workers do not regard this excuse as worth much, mothers merely prevaricate. "I could not tell her the truth," one explained to a neighbor. "It mak that nurse too sad." Her child continued to get coffee and a lot of sugar in his milk.

Mothers who realize that the old Italian diet is not adequate rationalize the situation as best they can. "The children here have no appetite. You gotta give milk here." "The air is different, not so good as in Sicily." "In the old country, you have bread, cheese, and water for breakfast." These remarks characterize the efforts of a growing group of second- and third-generation women who are seeking to learn how to adapt their ways and ideas to American conditions. Cooking schools help somewhat in this adjustment, but Italians think many of the dishes prepared are too expensive for the amount of sheer bulk produced, and bulk is needed to satisfy hungry children. "They are good only for side dishes," said some women who had learned to make apple sauce, creamed vegetables, and muffins, "and now [1933] no one can afford a side dish." They preferred their fruit raw and their vegetables with oil and not cream sauce. The latter necessitates a double boiler, a utensil unknown to the South Italian peasant.

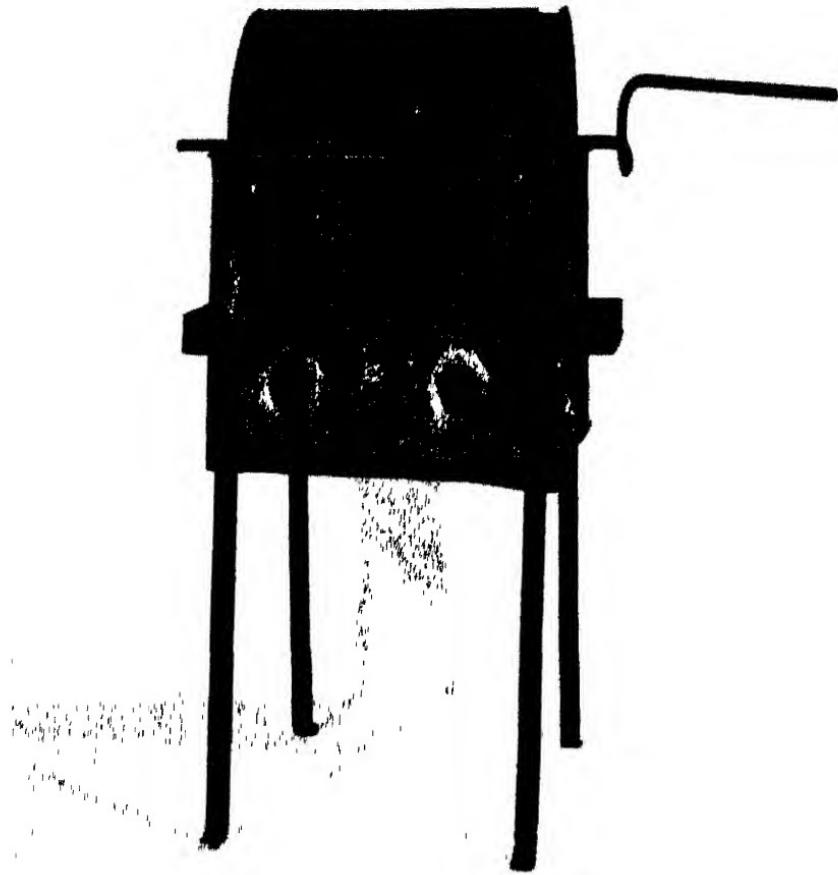
The adherence of Italians to their native cooking vessels further delays dietary adjustments. Many families brought a few cooking utensils with them from Italy. A woman from the Marches exhibited a homemade implement for forming *passatelli*, a sort of fine noodle. It resembled a potato masher.

The machine for roasting coffee or other beans or grains (*ab-brustolitore*) is quite elaborate. Made in this country by tinsmiths, it consists of an iron receptacle open at the top and standing on legs. Within, a long cylinder revolves freely when turned by a handle. At the bottom is laid lighted wood or charcoal. The odor of roasting coffee is most inviting and one that commonly pervades Italian quarters.

Here as in Italy the peasant wants his food as fresh as possible. While he approves of home-canning, he believes that the commercial method of preservation removes all the goodness from food and that a minimum of processes should intervene between harvesting and consumption. An astute vegetable peddler, who bought his wares every morning at the wholesale market, catered to this theory by shouting as he pushed his cart through the streets, "*Roba dalla mia ferma*" ("Things from my own farm"). His own townsmen (*pae-sani*) knew the trick but bought from him because they admired and understood his motives. The suspiciousness of Italians has forced American storekeepers to put up such signs as "Please do not pinch the peaches," to protect their stock from being damaged. Not one will buy ready-ground hamburg steak or slaughtered poultry. When at all possible, they prefer to raise their own chickens and rabbits. Even in a city where zoning regulations prohibit, a few continue to keep goats and hide them in a kennel or cellar closet when the inspector appears.

The growing season in the northern United States, comparatively shorter than around Naples, makes the vegetables palatable to Italians much scarcer during the winter. They resist, however, efforts to convince them to adopt the root vegetables plentiful here during the winter months, such as turnips, parsnips, and carrots. Certain groups, notably the Neapolitans, still eat carrots in soup and permit their children to devour them raw. No matter how hungry, nevertheless, none will consume a turnip or parsnip.

The depression of the 1930's modified considerably the grocery credit situation. This change did not affect so much comparative honesty, the sense of prestige that requires a



*Italian Coffee Roaster.*

(*Abbrustolitore*)



man to pay his debts scrupulously. It involved chiefly the fostering of a spirit of dependency through the giving of relief. Traditionally, these immigrants deal with their *paesani*, not only because personal relationship makes it easier to obtain credit but also because storekeepers from the same Italian district handle familiar victuals. Debts thus contracted are scrupulously respected and settled as soon as possible even though they at times run into two or three hundred dollars. Italian families on relief, however, learned in one way or another that financial aid beyond the strictly budgeted amount might be obtained. They thus sometimes lost their morale and left a trail of unpaid debts behind them. This has become more characteristic of American-borns, who have seen months of irregular work, than of the oldsters. Budgets are unknown to the Italian peasant. If supplies ran short in Italy, the family ate bread only; if that gave out, they ate the bran that usually went to the pig. When supplies were plentiful, all ate to repletion. The receiving of something for nothing is also strange. A social worker, who investigated and learned that a family did not need relief, was confronted with this statement as she was about to leave, "You no got surprise me?" "Have you no surprise gift for me?" To these peasants, charity is a free gift that has no other connection with the status of the recipient than that he belongs to a certain class. While the average Italian regards relief as repellent, the number that have become inured to it and have developed a sense of dependency upon it inevitably grew rapidly during the depression.

Relief in the form of grocery orders for specific products unrealistically neglected the persistence with which Italians cling to their own food habits. When they refuse a free American-style meal, it is habit and not need that dictates their decision. Although Christmas baskets usually contain items not found in the Italian diet, these frugal immigrants accept the gift after they have come to depend upon charity and then either exchange the undesired articles with non-Italian neighbors or sell them at half price to an American acquaintance. The relief grocery orders in one city excluded

tuna fish, peppers, eggplant, olives, olive oil, and chick peas even though these are among the most common Italian foods. It is important to know that the Italian often uses in large quantities what an American consumes only in small amounts. Canned meats and cereals represent to him particularly wasteful aspects of grocery orders. Relatively few will eat canned meat and only regret that it has not been transformed into highly spiced sausages. Since they and their families cannot relish it, they throw it away. A city garbage collector might be able to tell many tales. Their taboo on canned goods applied all the more to canned meat. In the case of cereals, ignorance of the use of double boilers figured particularly. "Italian people do not eat cooked cereal," exclaimed an informant. "Almost everyone I knew threw theirs away." They were afraid to object, however, because they did not want to be left destitute.

How much the Italian on relief longs to have "money in the hand" instead of a grocery order! Fifteen dollars in cash is worth so much more than fifteen dollars worth of groceries that he has not selected. Preferences after all, when taken into account, all go to make up the happy home atmosphere that gives a satisfying sense of security. Under relief conditions, on the other hand, an Italian woman's housekeeping assumes a complexity that is nothing short of bewildering. In addition, because with a little economy money can even be saved for other expenditures from a modest allowance, saving—the very breath of life for the peasant—is taken away from him. If one is to be of practical assistance to an immigrant group, one must know its dietary peculiarities.

## CHAPTER V

### DRESS

#### *IN ITALY*

CLOTHING differed as much from section to section among the poor in the Italy from which our immigrants came as did language, housing, and culinary methods. Its variations depended upon local traditions, the materials available, and the needs of the people as defined by occupation and climate. Much of the peasant clothing, regardless of design, was made from sheep's wool, woven and sewn in the home. Those who had to leave the sheltered valleys and work in the hills and mountains required warm coverings that as far as possible would shed moisture. Shepherds thus wore long hooded capes that fell below the knees and sheepskin leggings and trousers such as adorn American cowboys. Fishermen, on the other hand, used heavy breeches, woolen stockings, sweaters, and caps when out on the water in cold weather; and trousers and shirts open at the neck, with feet bare, in summer. Peasants who worked in the fields donned trousers and coats or sweaters in summer, both coats and sweaters in the cold season. Most of these work garments were dark colored, but their somberness was relieved at times by a bright scarf, and the cap, blouse, or shirt might be pink, green, or light blue. Italians, both men and women, were fond of bright colors. Sicilian men often wore a kind of long night-cap of knitted white cotton. Some of these were so long that the tassels reached the knees; others fell only to the shoulders. This tassel was pulled as a greeting.

Women ordinarily wore a separate skirt and a blouse or bodice, with a scarf over the shoulders and another on the head. The one-piece dress, however, has for some time formed part of the costume of urban dwellers, varied to meet local style traditions. The skirts or dresses were of wool, cotton, or hemp cloth. Silk only figured in the feast-day and wedding

clothes that were handed down from mother to daughter for generations. Gay-colored aprons were usual, but black ones were put on for work even when the wearer was not in mourning. Many Sicilian women boasted for special occasions a long all-enveloping cape and hood of black cloth. These mantles, sometimes gathered at the waist, were usually lined with a bright-colored fabric, and were worn only in public. The women threw them open for a second or two as a sign of greeting on meeting an acquaintance. The impression made by this gesture was striking and resembled that of the priest at the altar when he called the congregation to prayer with the words, "*Orate, fratres*" ("Let us pray, brethren"). These capes were therefore known as *orate fratres*. Since everyone did not possess one, for they were expensive, a small income could be realized from renting them. It was said that a woman with an *orate fratres* would never be in need.

No woman of the poorer classes dared to put on a hat. She would have been the laughingstock of her neighbors if she did. To don a hat was the privilege of the *signore* (gentry). Scarfs, veils, and handkerchiefs were placed in different fashions over hair carefully dressed each day. Certain articles of dress as well as ways of wearing them and the accompanying types of hairdressing were restricted to betrothed and married women.

Since dry cleaning was unknown, the only ways of cleansing garments were with the washtub and brush. Many of the best clothes were so ornate, sometimes covered with gold braid, embroidery, and lace, that a washing would have ruined them. A good brushing and airing, with a sponging of stains, was the only renovation they ever received, and as the years went by they naturally acquired a somewhat musty odor from long usage.

As Chapter II points out, our Italians did not buy ready-made clothes in their native Italy. They wove, purchased, or bartered for sufficient cloth to outfit the entire family. If their women did not know how to make garments, a tailor or dressmaker was hired to stay in the home while laying out and sewing the items needed. These specialists often received

farm produce for their work. Since only some 8 per cent of the women in an average village knew how to make a dress or coat, both well-to-do and peasant Italians had to hire someone to do it. The women in a family aided, however, in the manufacture, and frequently even the neighbors joined in speeding the process and thus in reducing the cost. Practically every woman, too, knew how to patch and mend. This means of staving off the day when a dressmaker or tailor would be needed attached considerable value to scraps of cloth. Among the poorest people, the equivalent of the ragman of America—called by them the *cenciaulo* or *pizzaloru* (rag- or piece-man)—both collected scraps and sold them again for use in mending, polishing, and cleaning.

The ordinary foot coverings worn daily by poor Italians when they did not go barefoot were simple homemade products. Only dress shoes, somewhat comparable to those regarded as a necessity in this country and perhaps the most expensive items in the South Italian's wardrobe, required the services of a cobbler. In the summer, everyday shoes for men consisted merely of wooden soles with a three-tie strap across the instep and another about the heel and ankle. In the winter, hemp sacking was wrapped about the foot and ankle. In parts of Sicily, the men sometimes made themselves footwear of rough pieces of leather by bending them to a point and fastening them with small leather thongs at the instep. This method left the heel bare. Most women wore *zoccoli*, resembling the rough footgear French women wear for housework. These had wooden soles bound with tin and leather uppers over the front part only. They could thus be slipped on and off without being touched by the hands. In some places, peasants thought it incorrect to wear plain *zoccoli* to church. They possessed better ones, often embroidered, reserved for such special occasions. These and men's dress shoes were carried to church and worn only during the service. Since such shoes required the services of a cobbler, one was called in to outfit the whole family at one time and was paid in the same manner as the tailor. These foot coverings sometimes lasted as long as fifteen years.

Inability to provide children with shoes in South Italy became a contributing factor to irregular attendance at school. Old people say, when speaking of their life in Italy, that they never saw a child at school without shoes. Clothes of a certain standard as well as shoes were thought necessary for school attendance, and these were only too often beyond the purchasing power of a child's family.

Men had themselves shaved only once or twice a week by the village barbers. Since such manufactured articles as razors were very expensive, their possessors had almost a monopoly of the shaving business. In some Sicilian towns, the men had the peculiar custom of permitting one lock of hair to grow on the nape of the neck. Called the *trizzi di donna* (woman's tress), it was never combed or cut, "and the owners think themselves fortunate in the possession of it, because they consider it a special gift—a sign of being favored of Fortune."<sup>11</sup>

In view of these conditions, little wonder that fashions changed slowly among the southern peasantry. The smart factory-made clothes of modern times had long since begun to appear in most of the towns, but the older people still valued good materials and durability rather than novelty in style.

#### *IN AMERICA*

In such a fundamental economic field as clothing, the customs and facilities of their new homeland speedily swept aside the old habits of the immigrants. Chain stores furnish cheaper and much more stylish garments than the dressmakers, tailors, and cobblers, and the latter found a better return by seeking employment in our factories.

Since styles drift rapidly from the wealthiest to the poorest in this country, in so far as finances permit, the ideal for young Italian women and girls became the attire of motion picture actresses and Junior League members; and for the boys and men, the collegiate garb. When they appear on the

1. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 69.

streets, despite their darker complexions, shorter stature, and fine dark eyes and hair, both sexes approximate the appearance of others in similar economic conditions in this country. This change brings with it many transition pains as well as the difficulties in the dress sphere common in any poor or middle-class family in the United States. Competitive spending and even competitive waste appears here as well as in such other spheres as home decoration.

Young and old men and women hold the ownership of a fur coat among their most cherished ambitions. In the first warm days of summer as much as in cold weather, women appear on the streets in cheap dark dresses underneath expensive sealskin coats. They may or may not wear hats, but peasant women of the first generation usually still prefer to go bareheaded. Silk underwear becomes the usual garment in America for little girls as well as for their grown sisters. Mothers stoutly affirm that it wears as long or longer than cotton, a highly questionable claim. The burden of competition in dressing one's child has often been keenly felt and expressed. The complaint of a mother whose child had been held back for a second year in the kindergarten, where school was held for only half a day, might have been made by any of her Italian neighbors. She exclaimed, "Now for another year, I must wash and iron the dress for half a day only! No! It is too much." The standard of dress, like that of houses, baths, and beds, is an American one, not an Italian. The second generation accept it as their right to dress and live as do Americans. Italian girls in particular realize that they are judged largely by appearance. When a man seeks work, too, employment managers are apt to list in his favor smartness of dress, good grooming, and a general air of assurance.

The fact that many American towns have laws that oblige the municipality to provide shoes for those pupils in their schools whose parents are too poor to buy them, as Chapter II mentions, is speedily learned and helps to breed dependency. Italians even use this point as a lure with which to bring relatives and friends to this land. "Only think!" they

say, in their letters. "The shoes are given free here to children—one need only to say that the old ones are worn out, and that there is no money for new ones, and see! Presto! Just like that comes a new pair!"

Clothes in good style cost money. Pressing and dry cleaning are other expensive American customs that the immigrants assimilate. Darns and patches, however, mean labor and self-denial. In the working class, the latter are tokens of industry and thrift, but America has frequently taught the second generation of Italians to look upon them as old-fashioned. School children are taught sewing, it is true, but they do not learn to make such practical things as under-clothing or knitted stockings. They spend their time on fashionable dresses that their old-world parents realize will be out of style almost before they are outgrown. The old traits, thus, are lost. While arguments may be advanced for the resulting gains, the losses bring in their wake trying maladjustments.

## CHAPTER VI

### MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

#### *IN ITALY*

LIFE in the south exalts the family." In Sicily, "family sentiment is perhaps the only deeply rooted altruistic sentiment that prevails."<sup>1</sup> From childhood on, marriage was the ultimate goal—the traditional focus of each aim and occupation—of our Italian immigrants in their native home. It colored the accepted social standards that defined sex relationships, determined the types of labor, and restricted other activities. While personal desires entered to some extent into the situation, marriage was principally a question of family duty, and the occasional unmarried adult reflected on both his family's and his own reputation.

To the Italian, "family" meant not only husband, wife, and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and godparents. The family, not the individual, was the unit of society, but family relationships gave the individual his status and guaranteed a measure of security. The family functioned as the chief and sometimes the only means of transmitting culture. The intense regionalism called *campanilismo*, described in Chapter I, strengthened family ties and rendered adherence to its group objectives all the more expedient to individual members. It found particular expression in the strong societal taboo placed on marrying outside the immediate community. This in practice meant that the contracting parties should at least be known to each other's relatives. The family, in exerting a strong compulsion on each individual to maintain its economic and social independence, nurtured feelings of honor and pride that made pauperism or other dependency a disgrace. A son whose conduct was correct was always considered eligible for a job, however menial it might

1. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 95.

be. A daughter, of course, usually could not go forth and take a position but had to devote her time to household duties as a preparation for her appointed destiny. Unmarried women and permanently separated wives were equally rare; divorce was unknown. As the accompanying table indicates, illegitimacy occurred less frequently in the south than in the north.

When natural calamities precipitated problems of depend-

**AVERAGE RATE OF ILLEGITIMACY AND  
ABANDONMENT IN ITALY  
BY STATES: 1906-9\***

	<i>Rate per 100 Live Births</i>
KINGDOM	5.1
STATES:	
<i>South Italy</i>	
Abruzzi	2.7
Apulia	3.1
Basilicata (Lucania)	2.3
Calabria	5.4
Campania	3.2
Sardinia	5.0
Sicily	4.3
<i>North Italy</i>	
Emilia	10.3
Lazio (Rome)	15.7
Liguria	4.9
Lombardy	2.7
Marches	7.9
Piedmont	2.8
Tuscany	6.8
Umbria	9.6
Veneto	5.6

\* *Annuario Statistico Italiano*, Seconda Serie, Vol. I, p. 20. Abandoned children are generally of illegitimate birth.

ency, the strong family loyalty effected a speedy redistribution of the burden. Upon the death of a father, relatives assumed more or less cheerfully the job of helping his widow and orphans; each contributed as he was able. Since the law added its coercive force to this customary intrafamily responsibility, the only people obliged to seek shelter in the poor-house were those pathetic persons who had no family. Poverty was so general, and the margin of security so narrow, that dependents seldom received actual financial assistance. They were usually able, too, to make some return for aid through their own labors.

Concomitant with strong family ties, Italians exhibited the degree of interfamily antagonism that is associated with this type of family organization. Both were heightened by the tremendous competition for the small return available and by the close scrutiny and discussion of out-group members common to small communities. An Italian<sup>2</sup> looks back at a typical situation in his own village thus:

In bad weather months, they arranged family affairs. That is they quarreled about them. . . . Always the same squabbles, endless squabbles passed down from generation to generation in endless lawsuits, in endless paying of fees, all to decide who owns some thorn bush or other.

This competition manifested itself particularly in the jealousy of property rights indicated by elaborate marks of ownership. Since the European sloe of South Italy and the *fichi d'India* (Indian fig or prickly pear of Sicily) make almost impenetrable hedges, these shrubs defined the modest limits of their land. Peasants also often laid pieces of slag beneath boundary stones on the theory that the slag would mark the ground even though the stone were removed. In parts of Sicily, for example, when an animal was bought in the market, a piece of hide was flayed away from the creature so that the new owner's stamp might be placed in the flesh, and the seller might not substitute another between purchase and delivery.

2. Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara*, New York, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, Inc., 1934, p. ix.

These evidences of suspicion recall its discussion in Chapter I and correlate with additional examples given in other chapters, especially in connection with the Evil Eye in Chapter IX. Covetousness, involving as it did danger of the Evil Eye rather than of overt efforts to obtain another's property, worried South Italians deeply and made them consider the ostentatious display of good fortune quite unwise.

The smallness of rural communities and the familiarity of all their members with one another precluded the need for surnames, a common lack among South Italians in their homeland. Patronymics first came into use during the Napoleonic era as a result of French officials discovering the lack. These bureaucrats arbitrarily assigned to each family the name of its home town or some other descriptive and identifying word. Because of the size of families, nevertheless, Maria Carelli might yet mean several different women. The people, hence, developed the additional expedient of giving nicknames or occupational or place identifications, all of which increased the specificity of nomenclature. The butcher, for example, became Toni the Butcher, and his son, Toni the Butcher's son Matteo. A woman who was disorderly in her appearance drew the unkindly label, *La Zuzusa*, a dialect word meaning "dirty."

The father was the head of the family in Italy. No one, not even the eldest son, to whom many privileges were given, undertook an enterprise without first obtaining his father's blessing as an indication of permission. The mother ruled the home merely as an interpreter of her husband's wishes; "even when he does not deserve it, she loves and obeys him."<sup>3</sup> She inculcated love for him in her children not only because he was their father but also because he was the economic mainstay of the home. "He who is obedient to father and mother," points out an old Sicilian proverb, "will live happily and prosper." An old Italian tailor's<sup>4</sup> recollection that "I obey

3. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 80.

4. Quoted by R. E. Park and H. A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1921, p. 10.

my mother's word, which is like the God," suggests the extent to which the mother's authority as well as the father's was honored. The child and sometimes even the wife used the formal "you" rather than the familiar "thou" in speaking to the father. It is even said that in Sicily the attitude of sons toward their fathers was so respectful that one would never suspect a relationship.

The mother had two other outstanding functions: to select wives for her sons and to hold the family purse. She took charge both of her husband's earnings and those of her unmarried children. She bought all the provisions for the home and all the clothing, even to that of her adolescent sons and daughters. In the latter case, however, she usually consulted their tastes. In determining how much should be spent for the various items under her control, she bore in mind those weighty family responsibilities, a dowry for her daughters and a marriage "gift" to her sons. Although part of a youth's own wages may have been set aside for years for the purpose, the son still regarded his accumulated earnings as a "gift" from his parents. Only when a son had an especially good job was this provision thought unnecessary. The dowry became the joint responsibility of the father and the brothers. Where daughters did any work outside their home, their earnings were also added to the fund. All this implied no elaborate bookkeeping system. Each child gave according to his abilities and was furnished with funds at the proper time according to his needs. Before the days of savings banks, the money was hidden away in the home. After the appearance of banks, this safer expedient became more popular until the failure of several shifted these funds to local post offices. People were more preoccupied with the safety afforded their capital by a government depository than with the sacrifice thus necessitated in interest returns.

Despite the strong family feeling, a husband only occasionally showed his affection openly for his wife. He tendered her the greatest consideration at all times and would not tolerate any criticism of her actions. When ordinary disagreements arose between them, neither brooked any interference

by others. In evidence of this is the famous Sicilian proverb, "He who interferes between husband and wife is a great fool."<sup>5</sup> When a husband treated his wife cruelly or neglected her and his children to an extent considered intolerable by the community, relatives and even neighbors stepped in. The father and brothers did not hesitate to adopt expedient measures. Popular consent, however, gave the father the right to discipline his children and even his wife. In the latter case, a valid objection was usually based on her failure to observe the customary code of behavior for women rather than on her disregard for his personal wishes. Such breaches of etiquette included the open discussion of her marital difficulties with neighbors.

The close interrelationship of family members in the eyes of the community made the actions of each of the greatest concern to all, especially because of their bearing upon the marriageability of each. Sons, as co-guardians with their father of their sisters, had to conduct themselves in such a fashion that no misdeed of theirs would prevent good matches for their sisters. The eldest son, in this and other regards, had both more responsibility and greater privileges than his younger brothers. It was usually he who brought his bride home to live. It was he who, on the father's death, became the head of the family with almost the same authority over other members as the father had had. Regardless of advanced age, his mother did not yield her position to her eldest son's wife, but the latter did the bulk of the work. The obedience and submission of this daughter-in-law was the price of family accord. As the Sicilian wish addressed to a person who sneezed, "*Salute e un figlio masche*" ("Health and a son"), indicates, all the sons in a family were regarded as more important social assets than girls. When a bride crossed the threshold of her new home, her friends stressed this evaluation by saying, "*Cuntintizza e figgi masculi*" ("Contentment and sons"). The precedence given boys over their sisters in family relationships was explained as fitting them for their future positions as husbands and fathers in this strongly pa-

5. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*

triarchal group. Demonstrations of affection between adolescent boys and their baby brothers and sisters were not considered effeminate, but rather a pleasing indication of the development of characteristics suitable to their future rôle as fathers. When a boy reached adolescence, he was considered old enough to serve as a chaperon to his unmarried sisters, even though they might be older than he.

No discussion of Italian family life would be complete without an account of those members who bore the relationship called *il comparatico* (godparenthood). Those in this relationship to a child included not only the "godparents of Saint John the Baptist"—those for baptism—but also a set for confirmation. The two sets were usually, but not always, different persons. Though *il comparatico* referred to ties that were spiritual rather than of blood, they were nonetheless of great significance. Godparents had an unusually high status in South Italian life, and their obligation implied both spiritual parenthood and aid in the case that their godchild or his family should get into financial straits. If a spiritual charge became an orphan, they were frequently required by judges at least to be present in court at the time of the child's disposition in order to take over their responsibility. The tie of *il comparatico* was often considered so strong—even superior to that of blood—that old Italians expected to meet their spiritual rather than their fleshly parents in Heaven. After children were baptized, the names for these spiritual parents, *compare* and *comare*, were always used by the godchildren. From then on, even parents and godparents never called each other by any other name. When a couple planned the details of their marriage, they chose their witnesses—best man and maid of honor—with the greatest care, for these two automatically became godparents of their firstborn. Even while these witnesses were merely functioning as such at the wedding, society already gave them the title of godparents in anticipation of the fulfilment of their task. The most exceptional power attributed to *il comparatico* was that children inherited personality factors from these spiritual parents. The Italians firmly believed that the spiritual as well as the

actual daughter of a bad woman never turned out well, that a madman's child could never be sane, and that the offspring of a thief never could achieve honesty. As they put it, "The cat's daughter either bites or scratches."<sup>6</sup> Or, in the case of godparents, their folk sayings typically pointed out, "From the godparents comes the blood," and, "A slice is taken from the godfather."<sup>7</sup>

Since godparents were frequently the brother and sister of the baby's parents, the combined blood and spiritual relationship formed a tie that contained more mutual interests than in the case of individuals less closely connected. When a man was found in a home treating children as if he were their father, scolding them and ordering them about, one was quite sure to learn that he was their godfather.

The namesake relationship had at least one point in common with that of godparenthood: the notion that with the name certain characteristics were also passed on. First children were usually named for their grandparents and sometimes for their godparents, but seldom for their father or mother. Italian parents were quite apt to read the personal qualities of such individuals in their namesakes despite the extent to which such patterns conflicted with the children's own conceptions of themselves.

Information on matters of sex was kept from both boys and girls while they were young. One hears that in some parts of Italy, due to the lack of privacy in home life, sexual relations between the parents occurred only in the morning after children old enough to be observant had gone outside to play. Another time chosen was the siesta hour, but this was possible only when the man's work was near his home. Until children were four or five years old, they were not made conscious of shame at nakedness, but thereafter strong inhibitions were carefully inculcated. Schools for boys and girls over a certain age were not only in different buildings but often in different parts of the town. Bathing places, of course, were also separate.

6. *Ibid.*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 149.

7. *Ibid.*

The premarital lives of girls were marked by careful surveillance. Their mothers constantly bore in mind the need for giving neighbors the correct impression—the socially expedient impression—of their daughters' activities. Little girls spent hours over their sewing and other duties, including in some cases spinning and weaving. When they worked at such things outside the house, it was always under their mother's watchful eye. After a girl reached six or seven years, she was never allowed to be seen idle or even playing games. If she were discovered in such unseemly conduct, both she and her mother would be criticized and lose status. When Italian women in America say that they attended school in their native land, they frequently refer to having been enrolled for classes in embroidery in some neighbor's home. Some girls did not obtain even this training. Among the Neapolitans, where women were employed in agriculture, girls who were "too stupid" to learn fancy sewing went to work in the fields. Even there, they were expected to work apart from the men; some busybody was always ready to carry reports of a girl's loose conduct to her parents and to the community at large. In the event of a misstep, the girl was sure to get a severe beating on her return home. On their way to work or on another errand, girls might not even stop to talk with male relatives, not to mention other men. A girl walking alone in town or country was an unusual sight, productive of comment on the part of neighbors. A Silician man recalls the following illustrative instance:

While doing his military service, he was walking into town one day and met a girl "so pretty, that before I knew it, I had told her so." An officer heard him, and after sending the blushing girl on her way, asked the soldier how he would have liked to have a stranger speak to his own sister. "I could not answer," he relates, "because I knew I had done wrong." He received a sentence of three months in jail for his offense.

The set of taboos that enforced chastity upon women and especially on unmarried girls apparently functioned more consistently in the south than in the north. The table com-

paring the average rates of illegitimacy and abandonment in the various states, given at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates the point. The Virgin Mary stood, for men and women, as the highest ideal of Christian womanhood. The women that men were to marry had to represent to some extent an approximation of that ideal, had to be set upon a lofty pedestal above the passions that admittedly swept the masculine world. The preparation for this rôle was even emphasized, in the case of one section of Sicily, by a dialect word for girl-baby that meant "a thing for other people" or "for friends."<sup>8</sup> Provided that she was chaste, even the plainest and stupidest girl could generally find some kind of husband. Girls who were not virgins at the time of marriage could be repudiated by their husbands. The matter of virginity was checked upon by the mother-in-law and sometimes also by the girl's own mother on the morning following the consummation of the marriage. Examination of the sheet on the bridal bed is the test. In certain places, custom even required that a satisfactorily stained nuptial sheet be hung over the balcony or window sill as a testimony of the girl's virtue. A bride was looked upon as a field ready for planting. Since she was not thought to have any active part in the creation of a child, the condition of the field was the chief concern.

From a sexual standpoint, boys were prepared for marriage in the opposite fashion. The appearance of heterosexual interest in males was frankly recognized in Italy by the provision of brothels under government support and supervision. A boy who showed no inclination to follow natural sexual impulses was apt to be regarded as effeminate and lacking those qualities desirable in a husband. He was given an opportunity to prove his manly characteristics by visiting a house of prostitution.

The only physical trait generally thought indispensable in a marriageable girl was slenderness. This did not mean the almost masculine slimness at times stylish in America, but rather a well-developed but not too plump figure. An old

8. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

proverb has it that "fat women are sterile." A fat old mother of twelve children informed the writer, "In Italy we watch our figures until we are safely married. After that, it does not matter." Well-kept hands, such as most American girls think necessary, were unknown among the peasants; a girl could not be an industrious worker if she was able to keep her hands in a dainty condition.

With such ideas of seclusion, chaperonage, virginity, fecundity, and feminine physique fully sanctioned by society, a girl had her career pretty well mapped out for her. While she had little choice—at least in theory—in the selection of her husband, she nevertheless succeeded sometimes in picking the candidate, and in any case was seldom coerced into marrying a man she disliked. A regard for such virtues in men as industry, health, sobriety, and religious devotion, however, took precedence over sexual considerations, and romantic love played little part. When a girl became interested in some particular man, she could always confide in her godmother, who usually stood closer to her than her own mother. If she approved of the man, the godmother then went to his mother, who was presumably on the lookout for a suitable wife for her son. The goddaughter was proposed and her merits weighed. If the man's mother thought well of the match, the girl's parents were then brought into the matter, and the size of the dowry discussed. With all parties concerned satisfied, the matter was then settled.

Marriage took place at an early age, with the bride sometimes as young as fourteen and the groom usually only a year or two older. Sisters were supposed to marry in turn according to age. If a girl did not marry by the time she was twenty, there was little hope of her fulfilling her traditional rôle except with some less desirable mate. The ambition of every mother was to see all her daughters *sistemate* (settled) as the consummation of her mission, before her death. Although the Italian marriage institution existed for the mutual advantage of both men and women, it was thought to be especially useful to women. Men asserted that a wife might always be

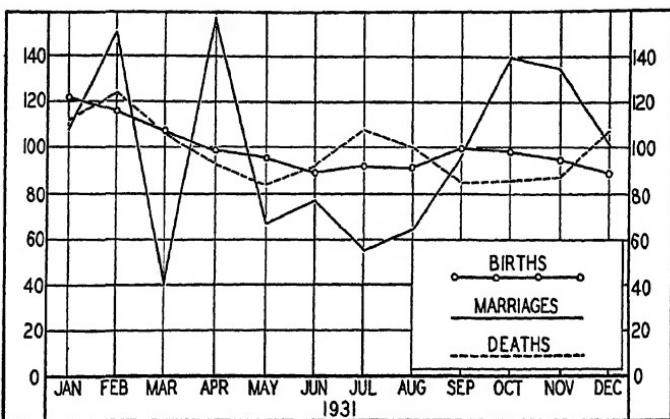
found somewhere. After all, she got her bed and board free through marriage. She worked for her support, of course, but that contribution was not reckoned as being of particular significance. Regardless of the facts, in South Italy "there lingers most tenaciously the idea that the right and proper destiny of the right and proper woman is to be kept on the earnings or the income of a man."<sup>9</sup> The bonds of affection that kept man and wife together were thus formed after marriage in the making and maintaining of a home and family. They had little chance to stimulate them beforehand.

Women had numerous ways, handed down from antiquity, of presaging the approach of a girl's marriage and the probable occupation of her mate. Such divination had to be performed on June 24, Saint John the Baptist's day, or near Naples on the eve of this day. In Scafati, to illustrate, lead was melted and dropped into a bowl of cold water. As the metal hardened, it took a significant shape. If it resembled a man's figure, marriage was near; if a boat, the girl would wed a fisherman. While the lead was being melted, the *Gloria Patri* had to be repeated three times, and the words "Saint John" inserted after each repetition of it. Then the girl for whom the forecast was being made said, "By Thy Holiness and by my virginity, show me what my fate will be." Removing the cloth placed over the bowl into which the lead was dropped, she looked to see what shape had formed.

The girl's parents announced the engagement at a feast. At this, the prospective bridegroom was always seated at some distance from his betrothed. He was allowed to see her only three times between this meeting and the marriage, and never alone. And it was literally just "see" her, for he might not kiss her or even touch her. "Kissing," comment Italian women, "is an American custom."

Some days of the week were considered throughout Italy as propitious for marriage, and others, unlucky. Verses such as the following, setting forth these carefully observed beliefs, were proverbial:

9. Cicely Hamilton, *Modern Italy as Seen by an English Woman*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1932, pp. 84-85.



*Daily Average of Italian Vital Statistics by Months for the Year 1931.*

(Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia, *Annuario Statistico Italiano, Anno 1933*, Terza Serie, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Vol. VII, p. 44.)



Non di Venerdi non di Marte  
Non si sposa e non si parte,  
Non si da principio all'arte.<sup>10</sup>

Neither Friday nor Tuesday marry a wife  
Or you will regret it the rest of your life;  
Begin nothing new, and you'll avoid strife.

While the taboo on Friday has an obvious Christian connotation, Sicilians carried over the notion from pre-Christian times that "it was propitious to love and marriage through the protection of Freya, so that 'Friday's child' would be less liable to be crossed in love than another."<sup>11</sup> The selection of Tuesday is difficult to explain.

Similar fetishistic beliefs are attached to certain months of the year. The accompanying chart illustrates how births and marriages were thus influenced. Since April was the most popular month for marriage, abstinence was rare, and contraceptive methods were unknown, a woman's firstborn conceived in this month would usually be born in January, the luckiest month of the whole year for births. He who was born in January was not only immune from malevolent power of the Evil Eye but even furnished by his presence a safeguard against it to those who were in his company. This probably originated from the fact that Janus was the Roman god who guarded the gates, that Saint Gennaro is the patron of Naples, and that January is the first month of the year. The Christian calendar also excluded Lent as a suitable time for marriages, and May because it was the Virgin's month. Many saints' days were likewise tabooed for marriage purposes. Seven outstanding saints' days occurred in June, for example, the most significant of which in this connection was Saint John the Baptist's day, already mentioned. Another day on which the taboo held good was July 16, the day of the Madonna del Carmine.

After the marriage date was chosen, final steps in the

10. Folk saying from the town of Barbara, the Marches.

11. Rachel H. Busk, "The Folksongs of Italy," in *Notes and Queries*, London, John C. Francis, 1887, Series VI, Vol. VI, p. 817.

preparation of the bride's dowry, including her trousseau, were taken. As this had usually been in the process of formation for years, it only remained to make sure that the required number of sheets, towels, and undergarments had been completed. In view of the time ordinarily elapsing between family washings, many of each of these items were needed, never less than twelve. Any more than this number, forty for example, served to emphasize the circumstances of the parents. The expression used to denote the extent of a trousseau is *dodici e dodici* (twelve and twelve) or *venti e venti* (twenty and twenty). In the matter of clothing, the husband was expected to match in quantity the articles corresponding to those furnished by his wife. If she had twelve chemises, he had to have twelve shirts. Indispensable to the bride's equipment was a mattress or bed, "the chief household article, the pivot of the home, from which will rise up the future family, and round which joy and sorrow will sanctify domestic affections." It represented "the principal expense for those who are arranging their daughter's marriage."<sup>12</sup>

Strict rules likewise governed such other details as wedding gifts. These had to be given not more than a day or two before the ceremony, better on the day itself, as if to avoid the appearance of heaping up too much good fortune and thus attracting the Evil Eye.

Church marriage used to be the only legal form of marriage contract. Since 1870, a civil ceremony nevertheless has taken legal precedence. Despite this, however, no good Roman Catholic considered himself safely launched in matrimony without the blessing of the Church. The latter rite had no set fee attached to it; the man gave as he could afford. Before they were married, bride and groom had to go to confession, and the priest instructed them at that time in the social responsibilities of their new status. Usually only the two attendants or witnesses mentioned above—the "godparents of Saint John"—"stood up with" the couple. The veil worn at the ceremony was designed originally, it is believed, to avert the envious glances of the Evil Eye; it later became, then,

12. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 88.

the symbol of virginity. After the ceremony at the parish church, since a wedding trip was too expensive for most peasants, the couple merely went to visit a relative in a nearby village or withheld a celebration of the event until the appearance of a special feast day. As they passed through the village following their wedding, confetti (almond candy)—thought to confer or assure fertility—was thrown upon them.

Since among Italians "No events of life are more interwoven with tradition and superstition than are pregnancy and birth,"<sup>18</sup> the months between conception and delivery were full of carefully prescribed rules for the mother. The marriage bed, in some villages, was strewn with salt in order to ward off the Evil Eye. One of the commonest taboos in the province of Naples forbade a pregnant woman or her husband, as Chapter II points out, to do any work on December 14, the feast of Saint Aniello, the "wicked brother of Santa Lucia." Interestingly enough, this rule also applied to indulgence by the men in irregular sex relations on that day. These people believed that there are two possible full terms for pregnancy: seven or nine months. If the child was delivered at the end of seven months, there was no anxiety; if not, every precaution was taken to make sure that parturition was delayed for another two months. A mother had to avoid scrupulously any experience that might adversely affect her unborn child, a type of belief one still finds in this country among many groups. She had to avoid looking at ugly animals; for example, pigs and lizards. She had to be careful not to have sensations of frustration; if she longed for an article of food, it must be given her, no matter what it cost, or the child at birth would bear a mark of the coveted object. Fear of the Evil Eye made pregnant women hide their condition until after the seventh month. Since by that time the child was fully formed, it was then thought beyond the possibility of harm for the time being. The expectant mother thus remained indoors or near her house during the day and took exercise only after dark. South Italian women,

18. M. M. Davis, Jr., *Immigrant Health and the Community*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1921, p. 191.

however, who worked in the fields, did not observe this taboo for a very long period of time; they could not afford to. Probably fearing miscarriage from contact with cold water, since in Italy bathing was done in a river or the sea, baths of any description were strictly avoided.

Interest in the probable sex of the unborn infant found expression among Italians in divination. Milk from a nursing mother, for instance, was dropped in a glass of water. If it sank, the child would be a boy; if it floated, a girl. In another test, the pregnant woman stretched out her open hands. If she naturally held the palms downward, she could expect a boy; if upwards, a girl. Some claimed that a strong heartbeat indicated a male; others, that the child's position was the best determinant of sex.

A common practice in connection with childbirth in South Italy—sexual intercourse at the onset of labor—may have contributed both to the high death rate among mothers and to the frequency of stillbirths. In an ethnic group as patriarchal as the Italians, however, it can be seen that this practice emphasized as effectively the man's sense of fatherhood as has the couvade in other cultures. The couvade, or male child-bed, is a variable custom found among many peoples. It generally calls for the father, during delivery, to go to bed and act as though he is enduring the pangs of labor.

No confinement could have a successful outcome if the midwife, known as the *mammana*, wore mourning or if a woman of ill repute entered the delivery chamber. "Cursed be the midwife who delivers a child feet first," is another old saying. As soon as the child was born, the midwife baptized it. In some parts of the country, notably Sicily, she automatically by this act became the child's godmother. Another woman, however, took her place at the formal baptismal ceremony performed by a priest. The spiritual relationship of the midwife was not terminated entirely by this second baptism. Among her other duties were the tearing of the ligament under the tongue so that the child would not become a stammerer and the burning of the end of the umbilical cord. This latter must be done whether or not the cord has already—accord-

ing to the place—been previously cut with a pair of scissors. The mother was never told the sex of her child until the after-birth had come away, lest her disappointment at the birth of a girl delay this process. A fringed shawl was held in readiness in which to wrap the child; the fringe was thought to catch the attention of witches, who would have to stop to count the number of threads before they could harm the baby. The most important clothing of the baby was the *fascia* (swaddling clothes) that holds it in the stiff position considered absolutely necessary to the support of the spine. In fact, when a tendency toward spinal trouble was shown in later life, Italians invariably imputed it to the absence of *fascia* in infancy. Women kiss babies on the feet in order to avoid any implications that might attach to them if the baby should later fall ill, because pregnant and menstruating women could harm babies by kissing them on the face.

Italian mothers hoped to avoid the disgrace of not nursing their own babies. Since bottles were not used for infant feeding in peasant Italy, a mother unable to do her duty gave a better equipped neighbor a small sum to do it for her. This payment amounted to about five lire a month among the very poor, a debt settled in goods or labor. When possible, children were nursed for two or three years, in the belief that it prevented pregnancy and that the child's health would be commensurate with the length of the nursing period. Other superstitious practices attended this activity. Nursing mothers, to illustrate, were careful to burn all meat and fish bones left after each meal. If these were thrown outside and picked up by a cat that had kittens, the mother's milk would disappear. "The cat," a popular tradition had it, "has stolen the milk." The calamity was remedied by supplying a dish of bread and milk for the thief; when the cat had eaten part of this food, the woman ate the remainder and then found her milk restored.

The Italian mother underwent considerable emotional strain in weaning her child, because she thought its crying was not only merely harmful but a sign of illness. Instead of setting about this alteration in routine in what pediatricians

would call a systematic manner, she smeared her breasts with coal or soot or put spider's webs on them to make the child turn against what had formerly been a source of satisfaction. To dry up her milk after a child had ceased nursing, some mothers squeezed a few drops of it onto a hot stove. Others, those for example from the town of Naso, in Sicily, placed a twig of mint or a "male" key inside their dress against the breast.

#### *IN AMERICA*

THE changes in attitude by Italians in this country toward the authority of the Church and the observance of religious duties—sketched in Chapter IX—have resulted in corresponding changes in the conceptions of parental control and of the rights of women. The status of women has thus shown a more marked advance in America than has that of men. Such remarks by young Italians about their sister as, "She is only a girl," represent a typically old-world attitude toward the "weaker sex," and they cease to be heard. Corresponding appraisals by women of themselves, such as, "She is a woman and must put up with what the rest of us have to bear," are met with only rarely here. But these changes have come slowly, and the transition brings with it many complications. The following account illustrates some of the typical problems resulting:

Mr. Pelotti had a large family. His eldest was a girl, Rosa; the second, a boy, Matteo. Rosa attended functions at the settlement house much against the wishes of her parents, who thought she should be at home learning the traditional duties of a good Italian housewife. She was pretty and graceful and danced the Tarantella so well that a settlement worker suggested special dancing lessons. These were to be free. Rosa, with some misgivings, asked her parents' permission. When they were on the point of granting it to her grudgingly, Matteo came home. His opinion being asked, he took a decided stand against the project. "What," he demanded, "will my friends think when they hear it?" And so Rosa was refused.

A month or so later, Matteo announced that he was taking danc-

ing lessons, not at the settlement house but from a private teacher to whom he had to pay a fee. This obliged him, he asserted, to reduce his weekly contribution to the family income. This precipitated a disastrous quarrel, for Rosa was indignant that her brother should take the lessons that—even when free—had been denied her. The disagreement ended in Matteo leaving home and going to room and board with a friend. His earnings were thus totally lost to the family. To make matters worse, especially in the light of what was left of the traditional Italian viewpoint on the matter, the separation placed the family in an unfavorable perspective in the eyes of their neighbors.

This incident shows, among other things, the waning of the father's authority. Those who, through various channels, try to Americanize Italian children—aided and abetted by American associates—do not attempt to uphold his traditional power. Outside the home many influences thus pull in one direction, and within, the parents try frantically to hold them back. When unfavorable situations arise that lie beyond the old people's control, the parents alone are regarded responsible by their associates. An old man, the chief wage earner and head of his family, pathetically exclaimed of his sixteen-year-old son, "He think he own the house." Although the lack of validity of parents' opinions in this country has brought a decline in the somewhat blind acceptance of their views, a fair semblance of the old-world affection within the family circle still characterizes these relationships in America.

The attitude between husband and wife has changed, but the old inhibitions against the infraction of the code still figure in the relationship. The following cases illustrate the situation more accurately than could a general description:

A social worker, in the course of a casual chat, was informed by a woman that her husband was an idler, a good-for-nothing, who spent what little he earned on drink. Since Italians are generally moderate in their drinking, this was a serious charge. "He is no good to anyone," the wife said sadly. When the social worker began to ask questions about the family, however, the woman refused to answer and went out into the garden to bring in her husband. In spite of all her

previous adverse comments, contrary to the traditional code as they were, she knew who was the head of the house.

A young married couple, who lived with the wife's parents, were having a "little argument" during which the wife gave a sharp retort. As every Italian knows, this is an unforgivable offense. When there is talk of a wife-beating, the women invariably say, "She must have answered her husband back. If so, she deserved it." Both of these young people had been born in this country, however, and something of the American attitude toward women had entered into their relations with one another. The wife's mother, present at the time, was appalled at her daughter's lack of respect and slapped the girl's face. "I cried when she did it," mused the young wife, "but I deserved it."

The following example emphasizes even more strikingly the contrast between the old and the new:

A young man came to a social agency to ask how he could get a divorce from his wife of less than a year. Their differences apparently sprang from the fact that he had been brought up in Italy and she, in America. The final turning point in their domestic career was simple and dramatic: He had come for dinner and washed his hands in the sink. Turning to reach for the towel, which his wife was supposed to be holding dutifully for him, he saw her sitting in a chair reading the newspaper and paying no attention to him. He reproved her irritably, and she answered, "I am not your towel rack!" He could hardly believe his ears. Forgetting about dinner, he left immediately to find his way to the social agency.

The question here was not merely one of cultural differences. Both had sloughed off parts of the old code. After all, he too was sinning in contemplating divorce rather than mere separation. The question was a far more complicated one—one of degrees in acceptance of the old mores.

"A woman can be the perdition or the salvation of her husband," an old Italian said, tritely enough to be sure. "If you are too strict, she is unhappy; if you are too easy, she goes too far; and then everyone in the family is unhappy, because

she is a disgrace." He hastened to insist, however, that he did not believe in wife-beating and that he himself had never laid a hand on his wife. Despite the typicalness of this man's viewpoint and the extent to which Italians attempt to preserve their traditional rights, most cases of wife-beating turn out to be nothing more serious than a slap in a moment of anger. Wives may not "answer back," but they usually have some little feminine way of getting even with their husbands. When the intervention of a third party in a family quarrel is thought desirable by a couple, they usually go to their parents for advice. In extreme cases, the opinion of the priest may be sought, but this is less likely here than in Italy where the priest was one of their own group. A physician, if he is a family friend of long standing, may occasionally be resorted to for advice. A separation, but not a divorce, may finally be effected without disgrace through a court. This attitude toward the entrance of a third party into the confidences of husband and wife is very clearly defined and firmly based on the European pattern. An understanding of it is essential to anyone who contemplates the study of domestic relations among Italians.

Generally speaking, when a woman questions the authority of her father or husband, her waywardness is blamed on lack of discipline during her childhood. But the disciplining of children becomes a different matter for the immigrant when he arrives in this country. Whereas in Italy parents give their children severe beatings in the belief that that is the only way to teach them obedience, in this country society—through a humane officer—places a taboo on this practice. The father, when too severe, is summoned into court and warned. Fathers of the first generation and their children both know this and are influenced by it. The South Italian has not yet adjusted to this situation adequately, either by developing new methods for inculcating the discipline society expects, or by learning those currently conceived in America as the correct devices for child training. These children thus grow up with less sense of the significance of social laws than did their parents.

First-generation immigrants guard as carefully against boasting about or displaying wealth as they did in Italy. Though they value ease and comfort no less than Americans, this attitude continues to reflect both their strong sense of thrift and their anxiety to avoid the Evil Eye, the consequence of envy. One does well, therefore, not to judge a family's economic condition too readily by its house, clothes, furniture, and food. These seldom give an accurate picture. Many people, too, put their funds into Postal Savings, especially since the report spread that "charity investigators" have access to the lists of bank patrons.

Surnames are still not commonly used in this country among Italians of peasant origin. Confusion consequently arises when they are required for purposes of identification. One hears, for instance, of Zia Maria Amalfi (Aunt Mary from Amalfi), Tony the butcher, my cousin Filomena's Annie, and Luisa *pezzo di pasta* (piece of pie). An Italian woman could not remember the last name of her son-in-law, even though her daughter lived only a few blocks away and came to see her mother every week. She hastened to assure her perplexed questioner, nevertheless, that she "had known it once." What suffices for a little Italian village is scarcely adequate, in this as in so many other respects, for a large American city. The same difficulty exists in regard to addresses. This explanation accords better with the facts in the average case than the offhand assumption by the American social worker that ignorance or a desire to conceal lies at the bottom of the matter.

The peculiar beliefs and practices surrounding *il comparatico* (godparenthood) have modified but little in America. Only one significant change has appeared in the baptism rites. Seldom does a preliminary baptism by the midwife occur now in the home. The economic burdens imposed by godparenthood, which include the buying of a complete outfit for the baby, have made those outside the immediate family circle reluctant to accept that status during the years of depressed economic conditions. Since to refuse godparenthood

is to offer a deep insult, parents sound out potential candidates quite carefully before making a definite proposal.

The finding of godparents proved a difficult problem to the Maturo family during the depression following 1929. Successive births made it increasingly difficult to find friends or relatives willing to take this responsibility in a large family, especially in one on relief. When the last baby was eight weeks old and no godparents had been found, the situation became the talk of the neighborhood. The unbaptized child was a direct invitation to the Evil Eye. It was therefore loaded with amulets, and its father borrowed a large set of cow horns from a butcher cousin to nail over the door inside his home.

The child finally developed a slight cold. Its parents in desperation let it be known that the baby was dying of pneumonia. Since the death of an unbaptized member would reflect discredit on the whole family group, a young brother of the father and the boy's fiancée came forward and permitted the baptism to take place in proper form. The baby rapidly grew better, and the parents announced that its recovery was due to the beneficial effects of the ceremony.

The practice of making children namesakes of grandparents and others, setting up another type of relationship with points in common with *il comparatico*, suffers in this country from the Americanization of Italian names. Patrick replaces Pasquale; James, Vincent; Fanny, Philomena. American-born children of Italian parentage frequently change a name that sounds too foreign for their tastes. This tends to weaken the belief, associated with the practice, in the inheritance of characteristics.

The changes effected in the status of Italian women by migrating to this country figure in the preliminaries to marriage even more strikingly than in married life. While the boys are as adequately equipped with sex knowledge as they were in Italy, girls meet the problems imposed by greater freedom of association with the other sex with little more to guide them than their mothers' traditional admonitions. Such statements as "Keep away from the men; they only want one

thing," and "Watch yourself with the men; they only want your honor; don't let them get fresh," are interpreted in novel fashions that do not always maintain a girl's reputation for chastity. When a young grammar-school girl asked her father, on one occasion, for permission to spend an evening with a boy friend, he announced, "The place for a young girl at night is at home with her mother." One mother asserted very proudly that all her girls were very much afraid of men, upon the evident assumption that this was the ideal attitude toward the other sex. These viewpoints are keyed to a social situation in which girls were under strict chaperonage and their prospective mate was selected for them. Even though boys in the United States still feel responsibility for the relation of their sister's virtue to the good name of the family, they seldom act as their sister's chaperon in a formal way.

Many mothers, when questioned about the amount of factual information on sex given their daughters, say they feel too shy to tell them anything. They rationalize that this does not matter, saying that girls are taught "that sort of thing" in school. This was flatly contradicted by a high-school girl in the presence of several women. She stated later, nevertheless, that she had been told "everything" by a friend of hers—a girl so "wild" that her mother had given her an unusual amount of information as a protection and warning against such associates—but the high-school girl "did not believe any of it."

An older married sister is often helpful in giving believable and useful information to younger members of the family. She usually has notions more adapted to American conditions and also understands how far to go without being accused of "telling things a girl shouldn't know."

The stigma on exogamy is breaking down among Italians here, but it has not been forgotten. Marriages between people from North and South Italian stock are becoming more frequent, simply because the families live in the same block or because a man and girl become acquainted while working in the same place of business. The North Italian, however, has



*Ready for Her First Communion.*

*(By kind permission of the parents.)*



to rationalize or avoid the complicated situations that would reflect upon his status. A North Italian woman from Venezia Giulia, for instance, conceals from her own relatives in Italy the fact that she married a South Italian. She attributes to this mismatching, however, all the bad traits in her children. Another North Italian woman who married a southerner extolled before visitors the beauties and other superiorities of her homeland and its people. When the time came for her husband to speak of his birthplace, he merely stated that it was "near Rome," and only added reluctantly on further questioning that his home province was Salerno, for he was ashamed. Salerno is one of the Neapolitan provinces and lies some one hundred miles south of Rome.

On the whole, young Italian men prefer old-fashioned wives. They seek the same traits that they observe in their sisters and their mother. If a man marries a girl from a different part of Italy, her ways will probably grate on him to a certain extent simply because they are not familiar to him. Few Italians, however, foresee how much trouble such cultural dissimilarities may cause in intermarriage, even though they realize the danger of mating with a non-Italian. They usually attribute trouble between a Neapolitan and a Sicilian to differences in individual temperament. When a man brings his wife to live in his parents' home, the rub between his cultural background and that of the Italian with another background only too speedily becomes apparent, particularly to his mother. Trouble immediately develops over cooking and other housekeeping methods. The young people, faced on the one hand with the financial need for living with others and on the other with deep-seated cultural conflicts, reluctantly seek a solution at a relief agency.

Many Italian parents bitterly dislike the kind of man that America makes available as a mate for their daughters. They try, therefore, to find a man who has been born and brought up in their own part of Italy, but the supply is fast diminishing. That only too wide a gap exists between such men and their daughters, who have been reared in America, does not seem a drawback to them. One Sicilian mother even took her

daughters back to Sicily and spent a year there casting about for likely men. Her girls, used to the American ways of walking and talking freely with men and boys, were not acceptable to her *paesani*. As the men said, "*Se si toccata, si maniata*" ("She who allows caresses, allows even more"). The disappointed mother finally had to resign herself and her daughters to the men of her own group in this country.

The second-generation Italian is apt to choose his wife for reasons other than the thrift, industry, and knowledge of housekeeping that were prerequisite under the old regime. Sentiment plays a part in this country to a degree unknown in Italy. When a young man gets acquainted with a girl at a pleasure resort or a factory, he may become friendly and follow up the acquaintance by calling. Perhaps, ignoring old-world custom, the two will spend holidays, Sundays, and evenings together seeking recreation in what to an American seems an innocent manner. To the girl's parents, this portends nothing but evil. They cannot conceive of such a free social life not leading to further liberties of an indiscreet nature. A daughter who reaches home at ten o'clock finds her angry father waiting for an explanation of her conduct. Some Italian parents, in fact, excited by the threat of such "wild" behavior to their family honor, have succeeded in placing their daughters in institutions for wayward girls. Since such girls are probably behaving in ways that seem quite harmless to other members of their youthful set, they naturally have no way of explaining their incarceration to their contemporaries. In fighting straight-laced parental demands, recriminations follow and then beatings, and the rift grows wider. By the time that girls reach sixteen or seventeen in America, however, prevailing customs usually make the mother and father content with no more than slapping or pinching. Even this treatment must be measured out, nevertheless, with discretion in an area in which girls can fairly easily find ways of earning their own living. To lose a daughter and her contributions to the home appears, even to an obdurate oldster, too heavy a price for insistence upon the old standards.

When a girl gets into trouble over her association with a man—especially trouble leading to a separation from her parents—she may have to face dire consequences. Although a man was her companion in flouting old customs, he may not take the girl's difficulties in the same light that she is forced to. He feels that he has to take into consideration the opinions of his group in the weighty problem of selecting a wife, and the girl he has helped to bring to disgrace usually no longer meets with his group's standards. If a sense of honor or feelings of affection persuade him to marry the girl, he is likely to excuse his misalliance by saying, "I had to marry her." And ever after he is apt to reproach her thus whenever differences occur between them. On the other hand, in the case of an illegitimate pregnancy, a brother frequently steps in to save the family honor. He and his mother hide the problem from the father and have the child placed in adoption as soon as it is born. They arrange the confinement either in a hospital or on a prolonged visit to the ever-helpful godmother.

Coeducation has particularly devastated the old taboos on social intercourse between boys and girls. Parents permit their children to attend coeducational high schools with considerable misgiving, but they do so because custom in America sanctions the practice and because higher education has prestige value in their eyes. Thus, their boys and girls go off to schools that offer liberty of thought and action, dances, and various associations and societies. When Sunday comes, however, the girls must either join their girl friends on their walk to church or go in the safe keeping of their mothers in order not to cause comment. The church may be only around the corner, and the high school several blocks distant, but the idea of chaperonage is fully maintained in the former case—a situation that has its direct counterpart in Italy. The following incident illustrates clearly the clash of ideologies on the coeducational front:

A 14-year-old boy with an I.Q. somewhat below the average of his class, the eighth grade, was brought into a juvenile court on a joint charge of theft of money from the teacher's desk and of hiding in

the girls' shower room. The Italian measure of his misdeeds was the exact reverse of the American appraisal. The school authorities held up their hands in horror at what they considered the boy's anti-social sex propensities but rationalized the desire of an adolescent son of a poor family to obtain a little pocket money. The Italians, on the other hand, with their strong sense of property rights, censured the theft as the more serious offense but thought that the school authorities had only themselves to blame in the other matter. They pointed out that the school people did not appreciate the danger of having the two sexes together in the same building at the age of adolescence. In Italy, after the third grade is reached, children are separated in different buildings.

Once a couple reach the point of considering marriage, they exhibit a radical change in their attitude toward the respective values of a church ceremony and of what constitutes a suitably furnished home. If both families have sufficient money and approve the proposed match, it is usual to have a somewhat showy wedding in the church with two or more attendants. Among the witnesses, of course, are the "godparents of Saint John," who have been chosen with as much care as in the old days in Italy—perhaps even more. Friends still throw confetti (colored Jordan almonds) or paper confetti at the couple but not knowingly to ensure fertility. It is a part of the ceremony that furnishes light entertainment and is never omitted. Sometimes the confetti is thrown at the married pair as they drive through streets in which friends and relatives live. Sometimes it is thrown in church as the couple leave. This incident illustrates the tenacity with which this practice is held:

A priest, annoyed at the mess that this confetti throwing entailed, asked the congregation to wait until they got outside the church. The people hurriedly left their seats before the couple was blessed to be ready for the bridal pair at the door. When the blessing had been given and the couple turned with their attendants to leave, they faced a practically empty church.

Following the ceremony, the bridal couple go to a studio to

have their photograph taken. Afterwards, there is a dinner at the bride's home or, if many guests are expected, in a public hired hall. The couple then leave for a short trip. On their return, they settle down in an apartment containing at least two or three rooms of new, fashionable furniture. Even second-generation Italians do not really consider that they are properly married without the offices of the Church. On the other hand, the expense of this ceremonial has come to prompt more and more young couples to be married by the justice of the peace. This cheaper form, after all, constitutes legal marriage in America, and it leaves more funds for setting up in housekeeping.

Actual figures for marriages in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1931 indicate the extent to which Italians risk evading the services of a priest. Of 243 ceremonies in which the groom was an Italian, 187 were performed by a Roman Catholic priest, 52 by a justice of the peace, and four by a Protestant clergyman. Of the 52 civil ceremonies, 38 were first marriages, and 34 of the brides were Italian.<sup>14</sup>

The following expense account illustrates what an average working-class family usually spends on a church ceremony in this country:

High Mass, with three priests	\$35.00
White rug, to keep the bride's dress clean and "for the look of the thing." This belongs to the church and is hired.	10.00
Flowers	15.00
Electric light	5.00
	_____
	\$65.00

When one adds to these costs those of the wedding outfit and the dinner, one appreciates the size of the burden, one that a poor family cannot undertake without sacrifice and planning. The parents of the bride and the groom usually share

14. Ruby Jo Reeves, *Marriage Folkways as Revealed by a Study of Marriage Licences in New Haven*, M. A. Essay, Yale University, on file in Sterling Memorial Library, 1936, p. 68.

these wedding expenses between them in this country, but usage varies in different regions and in adjustment to individual conditions.

In assessing the return which the immediate families realize from a church ceremonial, more than the entertainment and the direct status values must be taken into consideration. If a couple is not married by a priest but by a justice of the peace, their children may not be baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. Baptism is thought necessary not only for the child's eventual salvation but also for its immediate protection against the Evil Eye. Young people who have to make a choice between an ostentatious church ceremony and what they regard as a well-furnished home frequently allow the advantages of a nice home to outweigh the spiritual insurance for their future offspring, but they have a means of restitution. They plan, after all, to obtain the blessing of the Church upon their union in due time, as soon as their economic condition permits. But by the time such a stage is reached, the average Italian wife is pregnant. The wedding veil, the symbol of virginity, is not for her. Even if her pregnancy is not apparent, she would be afraid to conceal it at her prenuptial confession, for the priest expects to unite two souls only, not three. It is firmly believed that any such sin committed by an expectant mother is visited in some way upon her child: it will be born a cripple, sickly, feeble-minded, or worst of all, afflicted with the power of the Evil Eye. The need for baptism thus forces the couple to choose the one remaining alternative: to make a full confession to the priest and to have him perform a simple ceremony. Since the cost of this service ranges from two to fifteen dollars, wives have been known to go from priest to priest to find which will perform the ceremony for the lowest price. Sometimes, however, a couple prefer to pay more to a priest who will not scold them too severely for their sins of omission; they rationalize that the most spiritual guardians of the soul are often the most understanding, the ones who do not expect too much of "human nature."

Many of the old Italian beliefs connected with pregnancy,

especially those that taboo certain acts as exercising a prenatal influence upon the child, continue to be held by the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Some such notions, as a matter of fact, regardless of their absurdity in the light of scientific findings, are also found in quite sophisticated American circles. Their relation to one of the crucial experiences of life, a field in which few wish to experiment, gives these illusions unusual permanence. The belief that a pregnant woman should not be denied an article of food for which she has a peculiar longing leads to situations such as the following:

A young husband, whose wife had been refused grapes on a city relief order, thought that the only possible reason for the Italian shopkeeper's refusal was ignorance of the superstition. While the shop woman understood his cause for anxiety, she had to maintain her position and point out that "grapes are not allowed, and I cannot risk losing city orders by breaking rules." The husband and wife left the store convinced that disaster was imminent.

Fear of the Evil Eye, or at least some vague sense of the expediency of following a well-established tradition, keeps many women from going to a prenatal clinic for examinations. They must keep their condition secret. They excuse themselves on the ground that the clinic is too far away, that it takes too much time, and that it is not necessary. Other considerations bolster up their decision. While a cheap house dress can be worn during the last five months or so in the home, at marketing, and on a few neighborhood visits, a trip to the clinic necessitates a degree of style. They must have a good coat (in winter), a better dress, and other satisfactory articles of clothing.

A week or at least a few days before a baby is to be born, the expectant mother and her own mother or a sister make the room ready for the confinement. All curtains are taken down; the room is thoroughly cleaned; and new or at least fresh curtains are hung. One of the best counterpanes is placed on the bed, and the choicest night clothes of the woman's wardrobe are laid out in readiness. The following

illustrative problem arose in connection with such preparations by one mother:

A young woman who had applied to her local community nurse for clothes for her coming confinement was found to have a large store of embroidered and lace-covered articles of the sort from Italy laid away in a chest. The indignant nurse first accused her of deception and then decided that the woman was shy of using her old-fashioned things. Neither interpretation was correct. The woman's mother had died a few days before, and it would have been considered wrong to use anything so festive as her best handmade linens.

A confinement is one of the few occasions on which an Italian mother may show off her best linens and embroidered counterpanes. Like a funeral, birth has a festive aspect. It gives the family an opportunity to entertain relatives and friends, to show that one has fulfilled one's destiny in the customary manner.

A midwife is frequently employed, as in Italy, for the delivery. She charges less than does a physician. Old-fashioned mothers, too, regard the fact that she is a woman as a strong talking point. Together with her obstetrical services, a midwife includes in her work the washing of the mother and baby and the straightening up of the room for a week or two after the birth. A home confinement under such guidance also furnishes entertainment for the family circle of friends and relatives during two or three weeks. The efficiency of a physician, not to mention the austere rules of a hospital, interfere with much of their enjoyment of the occasion.

Italian notions on the care of infants have little in common with those of pediatricians. These mothers nurse their offspring whenever the child cries and they have time to feed him. They think that a wet diaper promotes growth and gossip among themselves how "that Mrs. Nurse at the clinic makes my cousin Anna's young Lucia change the baby oh! so many times." What is worse: "They weigh and measure the baby, God save the poor little abused thing!" Any Italian mother knows that weighing keeps a baby from gaining weight and that measuring effectively stops its growth verti-

cally. Neapolitans, with their own ideas about child care, believe that weighing and measuring draw the attention of the Evil Eye to the child's progress.

Children do not appear so frequently in Italian families as they did abroad or among first-generation immigrants. The number of offspring now varies from one to four or six, and more cases of childlessness are to be noted. Women of the first generation, however, become pregnant every year or so. They are frequently able to limit their brood to eleven or twelve only through abortions, helped with *un po'di medicina* (a little medicine). Large families can nevertheless still be found. Cases observed include one with fourteen living children, the product of twenty-nine pregnancies, and another with seventeen remaining from twenty-six live births. The mother of fifteen children in a third family is humorously labeled by her *paesani* (neighbors), Mrs. Birth Control Rocca (patronymic fictitious). The father of fourteen undernourished specimens, all the apples of their parents' eyes, explained his wife's pregnancies thus: "Ah, we are the old people. What can we do? It is there! It is done!" Those simple statements reflect the mystery of the sex impulse, so natural a part of life and yet one involving so much; the strength of the religious taboo against any interference; and the contempt of the Italian for the poor begetter as no asset to society. An Italian fisherman, noting that a couple with two children had been married ten years, commented, "That man should feel shame to himself." The mother of twelve living children voiced the problem thus: "If you do anything to stop it, the man he get ill. He get the bad blood. God, He means it to be this way. The woman she must do it to keep the peace." Still another mother concluded, "A man ain't necessary and how he ain't!" She was working outside the home and bearing children at frequent intervals, combining the functions of husband and wife, for the man was out of work.

Many of the young couples make a real effort to restrict the size of their families. They ordinarily use the simplest and cheapest method known, called "sleeping the American

way." This always means separate beds, or more often separate rooms, for the father and mother, with the additional safeguard of having the girls in the mother's bed and the boys in the father's. Other devices are also used. While all these measures perhaps result in dissatisfaction and irritability on the part of the husband, the wife can usually overcome her vague feeling that something is wrong and resign herself to the changed order with no small satisfaction in the elimination of the fear of repeated pregnancies.

Many maladjustments in Italian homes in this country may thus be traced to the fact that their marriage mores are in transition. As the lives of the old people draw to a close, they retire more closely behind the barrier that lies between them and the new culture. They do not understand, nor have they much desire to gain a comprehension of, the foreign ways of life that they call "going American." At the same time, one senses a faint longing on the part of the old to share more closely in the intimate lives of their children, mingled with a philosophical tolerance for changes that cannot be avoided. The latter is part of the fatalistic attitude embodied in the words, "It is God's will," that one hears every time Italians meet with a situation beyond their comprehension. The problems attending adjustments in this range of immigrant life are, however, nonetheless severe. They require of those who would attempt to aid in their solution a broad comprehension of the old, of the processes and costs of change, and of what the new may be.

## CHAPTER VII

### RECREATION AND HOSPITALITY

#### *IN ITALY*

MOST of the recreational activities of adults in the South Italian homeland were associated either with family hospitality or with the celebration of feast days. Those of women, in fact, were practically limited to these spheres, but men might in moderation seek entertainment at the village tavern and elsewhere in gambling and other games and in gossip, jokes, and drink.

Peasants and their families could visit each other's homes in the evenings, on Sundays, and on religious feast days. The women took their embroidery or knitting with them. Refreshments—always offered—included coffee (so-called), lemonade, or wine-and-water and, if the hostess were poor, such a simple delicacy as squash or melon seeds or salted *fave* (beans). The mores dictated that, if a family were very poor, guests should take but little food. Sometimes only one member of the visiting family would eat; the others would give some pretext. Young children either were not invited to take refreshments or were expected to refuse. Refusal by every member of a family, however, was an insult, a suggestion that the provision made was not good enough or even harmful. Since much of the social life went on out-of-doors, the street was frequently where this entertaining took place as well as where children played, women worked, and men had their games. The hospitality of South Italian shepherds was considered proverbial. Kindness to strangers was inculcated in them from early childhood. "The door is always open," and "There is always enough for one more" were some of their popular folk sayings. This openhandedness did not mean that they readily admitted strangers to the intimacy of their family life. It merely signified that such privileges as food, temporary lodgings, and other minor types of assist-

ance were to be extended to the traveler. Beyond this, the Italian peasant did not go; he had a traditional suspiciousness of any stranger who attempted to overstep the bounds of propriety.

Men indulged in games of chance of many kinds during the afternoon siesta and in the evening after work. Casual travelers, in fact, were apt to overestimate the amount of time and money spent on this form of recreation, but they did not realize that the men they saw playing had risen at cockcrow and would have to work until sunset. The abandon with which men of "Latin temperament" give themselves to these games strengthened this misconstruction, this interpretation of one people's practices in terms of the practices and standards of another. One of the best known of these games was *morra* or "throwing fingers," called by the ancient Romans *micare digitis*.<sup>1</sup> This pastime for two people, usually played for money, required each person at a given signal to hold out one or more fingers and call as quickly as possible a guess of the total the two had extended. The winner was he who estimated the figure more closely. Poor folk, who did not see a *soldino* sometimes for weeks at a time, dispensed with stakes in this as in other games. The ancient game of bowling on the green was also quite popular.

Everyone played the government-controlled lotteries, undiscouraged by months of fruitless staking. The agency that conducted these had offices in even the smallest village, sometimes in the post office, more often in the same shop that dealt in those other government monopolies, salt and tobacco. Those in charge were usually retired soldiers who received the job as a kind of pension. South Italians, therefore, regarded the sale of lottery tickets somewhat in the same light as the sale of salt and tobacco, those two common articles of everyday life. The winners were listed publicly, and those who succeeded more than once gained considerable prestige. Their advice on the choice of numbers was thought quite valuable. As in connection with "numbers" lotteries in this

1. J. J. Blunt, *Vestiges of Ancient Manners and Customs*, London, John Murray, 1828, p. 275.

country, dream books gained wide acceptance as guides in the selection of lucky numbers. A "celebrated astronomer and cabalist," G. P. Casamia, too, developed a book on signs and portents called *The Treasure Hidden in the Lottery* that went through many editions and had numerous competitors. Since no one checked outlays against winnings, none was able to visualize the cost of the pastime.

One of the most enduring types of recreation, the religious festival, was so rooted in the social life of the people that it was carried over to America in a fairly pure form despite the drastically changed environment. It was characterized in Italy by ancient customs that reflected the spirit and pageantry of Roman myths and practices. It responded to a need for color in the drab lives of the peasantry with spectacular costumes, flower displays, and floats in the processions. To the practical American mind, eyeing costs without scrutinizing the less apparent services of these celebrations, the burden on the poor seems intolerable. These festivals were numerous as well as costly, and thus diminished the time available to the poor for their labors. Sicily, for example, had thirty-seven, not counting the fifty-two Sundays and five days of Carnival—a total of ninety-four days. While "there is no unemployment in Italy," they thus "waste" most of their working energies during one fourth of the year.

Since typical religious festivals are described in Chapter IX, only one is mentioned here. In the picturesque Ascension Day celebration, shepherds led their flocks of sheep, cattle, and goats to the sea, the lakes, or the rivers to give them the sacred bath potent only on that day. This cleansing brought healing and health to men and beasts. Cows were always adorned for the occasion with flowers and banners in performance of vows made to holy patrons during the preceding year. If a man had promised a calf as a thank offering for some mercy received, he hung a bell on a silk ribbon around its neck and led it on this day to the church of the patron or patroness by whom the favor had been granted.

Even the Carnival Week of Italy, entirely secular in nature, was celebrated in accordance with traditions at least as

ancient as those of the religious festivals. This period took place immediately before Lent. Being closely connected with local historical events, as were the sacred festivities, the celebration differed in each region and even in each town. The performance of the *Mastro di Campo* (Leader of the Army) at Mezzoiuso in Sicily provides an illustration, albeit a more elaborate one than many, of the pageantry in which peasants and townspeople indulged during Carnival Week. Salvatore Raccuglia,<sup>2</sup> an "eminent historian and sociologist," describes it in part as follows:

For eight or ten days before the one settled on for the performance, a stage is in process of erection in the middle of the chief square of the town. . . . This stage has a parapet all around it, which at the right moment is decorated with ferns and green branches, to represent the Royal Castle. At a specified distance, in an unoccupied corner, under the bell tower of Santo Nicola . . . another stage is erected. This . . . represents the little Castle of the Mastro di Campo. Practically everyone joins in and there are very few homes where some preparation is not made for this masked event. . . .

On the day appointed, towards eight o'clock, the balconies and windows which overlook the square begin to be filled with people, principally women and children; the men crowd on the square itself, where the throng swells to such a degree that one can move forward only with difficulty. Many families come from nearby villages to look at the unique spectacle. By degrees, people fill the square and neighboring streets, all wearing different masks. . . . All the masks, except for a few modern ones, are traditional . . . then the real performance begins.

On the side where the new fountain is, the King appears with the Queen on his arm, followed by the knights, barons, and princes who compose the court. . . . There are in all about fifty persons. Hardly has the court taken up its position when the Mastro di Campo arrives on horseback, leading two young horses by their bridles. While he rides around inspecting the Castle, there collect, counting men and boys, about sixty people, all dressed in anything in the way

2. Quoted by Giuseppe Pitrè in *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, pp. 267 ff.

of military clothing which they have been able to obtain. . . . When the Queen catches sight of him, she appears moved and waves her handkerchief at him. He makes signs to her, looks at her through a telescope, and then sits down at a little table and writes a letter to the King demanding her hand, threatening war and massacre if his request is refused. An ambassador rides up to the Castle where he is at once blindfolded. He then presents the letter, which the King reads with increasing anger. After threatening the Queen, the King sends the ambassador away.

Then the epic moment arrives. Every bugle resounds from the Castle . . . a cannon is set up in a corner, the knights draw their swords, and, led by the Mastro with a dagger in his hand, the fight begins. The Mastro's part consists in a lengthy traditional parade around the square and the Castle. His gait is almost a dance, and is accompanied by the beating of a drum. For more than an hour, he goes around, sometimes alone, sometimes at the head of his troops, until he is so exhausted that when the performance is all finished it is said that he has to be bled. He makes several attacks on the castle, but is always turned back by the King at the head of the ladder, while the cannon thunders and the soldiers shout.

Finally the great moment comes, for the Queen, moving around among her maidens, never ceases to beckon to the Mastro. He climbs the ladder once more, crosses swords with the King, and receives a blow on the head. Stunned, he drops his sword, whirls around, and falls over the platform, from a height of about five meters, into the arms of a dozen or so men. . . . His fall is received with more acclaim than anything else in the performance. The Queen, believing that her lover is dead, melts into tears. . . . But the Mastro is not dead after all. He has recovered and takes up the fight with renewed vigor. He storms the Castle, and is there joined by the King's forces who have deserted. The King is taken prisoner to the obvious joy of the Queen. . . .

The music strikes up again. . . . A parade takes place in which the Mastro . . . leads off with the Queen on his arm, followed by the King in chains and all the lesser performers. The procession goes around the town, and as each man passes his own home, he drops out, for by this time it is almost midnight. . . . The whole performance is based on an historical occurrence which took place

in 1412, when Bernardo Cabrera, Count of Modica, who was madly in love with Queen Bianca, ruler of the Kingdom, stormed the Castle of the Steri in Palermo.

This variant on an ancient heroic theme took place in a town of less than six thousand inhabitants. A wealthy benefactor usually helped finance it, for rich and poor customarily joined in the annual Carnival.

These spectacles, spread throughout the year, furnished a type of diversion poorly replaced by the localized performances offered by non-Italian groups in America. Motion pictures come closest to satisfying the same needs. While the festivals of Italy were survivals of a long-lost past plus recent variations, they called forth untiring enthusiasm. On such occasions vast throngs crowded the streets until far into the night.

Men combined business with pleasure in hunting expeditions and the *mattanza*, the great tuna slaughter. In Italy as in this country, certain of them permitted their interest in hunting to develop into a consuming passion. In preparing for their annual expedition, they neglected economic pursuits, family affairs, and even health. Since guns cost more than most poor men could afford, continental peasants and townspeople depended upon snares and traps to obtain rabbits and hares. In hunting in Sicily for the quail that appeared in great flocks during April and May, however, guns were necessary and could yield a fair return to their owners, and rich and poor took part. These birds, migrating north from Africa, paused to rest in the evening near Palermo. They could easily "fall a prey to the hunters, to whom the pastime is more than recreation, in fact it is an absolute obsession." Two or three hundred hunters with their dogs would gather during the night on the vast plateau that extends along the edge of the desert country of Santa Rosalia. As "the first rays of the sun strike the earth majestically from the far horizon, the chief hunter claps his hands, and the whole crowd moves to the attack like an army." In the confusion, great care had to be taken that hunters as well as quail

did not get in the way of gunshot. Beaters ran "hither and thither, collecting the victims, announcing in loud and triumphant tones the name of the hunter to whom the booty has fallen."<sup>3</sup> The shooting of larks, although they were less numerous, is called "no less entertaining."<sup>4</sup> What is called sport in one country would shock the sportsmen of another.

The *mattanza* resembled the quail slaughter. Schools of tuna were driven into restricted areas along the shores of Sicily where the "sportsmen" cut their throats. A picture of this ancient sport in the National Museum at Palermo numbers among the spectators King Ferdinand III and Queen Caroline of Austria, attended by the nobility of their court. An Italian-born resident of New York City states that stands were erected for the spectators, similar to those used at football games in America. The *mattanza* was considered a wonderful sight.

South Italians loved dancing "with a simple passion . . . quite independent of flirting and fooling, eating and drinking, display of finery, and other adventitious attractions that supplement it elsewhere." Their traditional dances were taken "with almost ceremonial seriousness."<sup>5</sup> Dances were of two general types: the round dance and some others that were only for pleasure, and such ceremonial dances as the *tarantella*. Women usually performed the *tarantella* only as a magic rite for the cure of a tarantula bite. The *tarantella* had this significance principally in Apulia. Street dancing was largely restricted to the poorest peasants. Although they chaperoned their daughters as strictly as did any class, those slightly above this economic level did not think it right for women to dance at all.

In addition to the fiestas and Carnival Week, three other types of diversion kept folk tales and historical incidents alive in the minds of the people. These were the carvings of the shepherds, the accounts of the *contastorie* (public storytellers), and the performances of the puppet theatres. The

3. Giuseppe Pitrè, *ibid.*, p. 168.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

5. S. C. Musson, *Sicily*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1911, pp. 196-197.

shepherd whose equipment and other products did not testify to long hours of careful carving was considered ambitionless. He made and ornamented, therefore, collars and bells for his sheep and other stock as well as sacred figures and whistles. His designs represented the past events, such as the Sicilian revolt of 1860, and the tales that were kept alive in the puppet theatres and by the *contastorie*. The strangest reliefs are those to be found on shepherds' staffs in the region of Salaparuta, Sicily. They consist of a series of numerical symbols of which each countryman knew the meaning. These interpretations follow:

IIII	Quattro fidili	Four faithful ones
IIIII	Cincu li fricani	Five Africans
II	Dui battizzati	Two baptized ones
III	Tri turchi'n pirsuna	Three Turks in person
I	Secuta c'un prufeta	Followed by a prophet
II	E dui pagani	And two heathens
C	Chistu è lu signu di la mezzaluna	This is the sign of the half moon
II	Dui "su' li" giusti	Two are the just ones
III	Tri li filicani	Three are the sons of dogs
I	Chista è la sorti	This is fate
I	Chista è la furtuna	This is fortune

These symbols were used in an ancient "game against the Turks," thought to have been invented or discovered by the poet, Antonio Veneziano of Monreale, when a slave in Algiers.<sup>6</sup>

Shepherds carved sets of the forty or more figures used in home and church throughout Italy and especially in Sicily at Christmas time to depict the Nativity. They copied the traditional characters from the models made by their fathers and grandfathers. Similar statuettes were also formed by others than shepherds from colored and baked clay and dressed in fabric according to the proper style. Shepherds also made whistles shaped roughly like saints, madonnas, and soldiers, and sold them at church festivals.

6. Giuseppe Pitrè, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-124.

The life of the Middle Ages survived in all its freshness in marionette theatre shows and in the public storyteller's tales. The latter, the *contastorie*, was the more familiar because he did not need the equipment required by a puppeteer. He was almost always an illiterate who had learned his repertoire verbally from another. To present his tale of the Paladins of France and their battles with the Infidels, he took the parts of the various characters involved as well as of the narrator. His audience was composed chiefly of men and boys; only a few of the older women joined the crowd that would sit around the *contastorie* in the public square. Attendance by women was more common in the Neapolitan towns than in Sicily, where a taboo against the intermingling of the sexes was more strictly observed. The recital was preceded by a ceremony in which the audience stood, took off their hats, and crossed themselves, for much of the tale concerned battles between Crusaders and Infidels. The listeners almost felt as if they themselves were about to go forth to fight on the side of Christ. They sat in wonder and fear as the *contastorie* shouted and chanted, shook his fists, and stamped on the boards of the little stage on which he stood. At the end of the *cunto* (story), the performer—without moving from his place—began a familiar conversation with his neighbors, explaining, clearing up doubtful passages, and harmonizing facts that appeared contradictory. He started discussions among his listeners and put an end to their disputes. While all were competent to judge, the people were ready to defer to the undisputed authority of the *contastorie*. Both simple workman and street urchin could repeat such tales, a fact that maintained the popularity of this diversion with little change from generation to generation.

The children of Sicily had more than three hundred games and pastimes. These involved kite flying, tame birds, bows and arrows, and attacks on castles. Many recalled "bygone practices, relics of a past lost in the mire of time." Such were "Run, Sheep, Run," similar to the American game of the same name and to the English "Black Sheep." Other such were the counting-out games, resembling ones found through-

out the world. These included "formulae for guessing and relics of ceremonies and rites of the 'three great conformities and uniformities of family life of ancient times—religion, marriage, and the burial of the dead.'" The counting-out rhymes almost always contained references to the cock or chicken. Here is a typical one from Minori, Campania:

La gallina zoppa zopp!  
Quante penne ten' 'ngop?  
Tene vinti quatt!  
Uno, due, tre o quatt'.

The cock comes hopping!  
How many feathers has he?  
He has twenty-four.  
One, two, three or four.

Several children held out their hands with fingers extended while another child repeated the lines. One child touched a finger at each word. The child whose finger was touched at the last word tucked it under, and the recitation went on until all the fingers of all the children had been eliminated except one finger of one. The owner of this finger was "it." Another rhyme began somewhat in the same manner, thus:

Pollaio, o mio pollaio,  
Quanti polli ha il mi pollaio?

Chicken coop, oh my chicken coop,  
How many chickens are there in my chicken coop?

Several lines followed, the antiquity of which make them lose their flavor by translation. This elimination game functioned in the same manner as the preceding.

In view of these diversions available to the South Italian child, the question became one of opportunity for participation—of places and of time to play—rather than of ways in which to satisfy the need children feel for such activities. The playgrounds that existed in connection with Italian schools

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 417 ff.

were "scarcely worthy of the name." During more than six months of the year, too, "no one is keenly disposed to active physical effort and at no time in the year is there that atmospheric incitation to physical activity that exists in England or in our own country," America.<sup>8</sup> The fact that peasant children had to take an active share in field labor at a relatively early age—discussed in Chapter II—accounted for the scarcity of children's games in some regions.

#### IN AMERICA

PROFOUND changes took place in these rural diversions when the Italians migrated to this country. The most striking of these resulted from the transfer of the scene of most recreation from the open air to indoors and the substitution of the "talkies" for such age-old diversions as the tales of the *contastorie*, the shows of the puppet theatre, and the pageantry of Carnival Week. "Much gambling persists. The saloon, though far less widely patronized than among a number of other nationalities, acquires a strong hold. Beer was hardly known to the [peasant] Italians in Italy. In the strange land it is a solace which terminates the strain of the day's hard toil."<sup>9</sup> These changes came, of course, gradually and with many regrets upon the part of the first generation. They were fully accepted, however, by their children.

The language barrier prevents the first generation from enjoying the silent movies and even the "talkies." Despite all that may be said to the contrary, the interpretation of action in the cinema does not always give a clear impression to those who cannot read the captions. While the "talkies" do not require a reading knowledge of the American language, the old folks find the subject matter uninteresting. They do, however, permit their children to attend. Social workers dealing with relief cases learned, too, that although the oldsters did not attend the movies they garnered a feeling of prestige

8. Joseph Collins, *Idling in Italy*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920, pp. 267, 272-278.

9. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 896.

from being able to attend, from having enough cash to do so. The following incident illustrates the situation:

An old woman applying for relief complained that she had not seen a movie during the current year. She therefore believed that this item should be allowed on her "budget," a vague term to the average uneducated Italian that represents the ideal elastic system of economy found only in America. After the woman had left the agency, a neighbor remarked, "She never go to the movies in her life." The trouble was that the old woman had formerly felt a sense of prestige and security in having money to go to a theatre within easy reach. She could pass by and say to herself, "I no go today." She could then continue on her way without that devastating sense of frustration so common in modern life. The fact that every time she did not go "put money in the 'pock'" also contributed to her satisfaction.

Young Italians, on the other hand, go so frequently to the movies—whether they can afford it or not—that the practice becomes an economic burden and a serious time waster. The following story suggests the extent of the problem:

A settlement house established a club and invited, among others, several young mothers. The meetings were held on Mondays and Fridays. On the first meeting of the club on a Friday, there was a full attendance, but the group almost disappeared by the next session. The teacher decided to visit the absent members to ascertain the cause. One mother, Mrs. Fallone, said she had been unable to leave her baby. She had declared the previous week, however, that she had received three offers from friends to care for the child. "Where are the women now?" asked the teacher. "Oh," answered Mrs. Fallone, "they all gone to the movies before the money finish out." Their husbands had been paid the previous Saturday, and the wives' first care was to provide for the week's recreation.

The older generation does not approve of this "waste of money" and is reluctant to have any part in it. On the whole, however, lack of participation is not due entirely to thriftiness—an impression many like to give—but to the language

and culture barriers. When an Italian film appears at a local theatre, most of the older group may be found in attendance.

Dancing draws a large following from among the Italian youth, even though this diversion also costs a lot of money. Girls with strict parents do not usually go to dance halls patronized by non-Italians. When this rule is relaxed, Italian escorts never permit their girl friends to dance with men of other nationalities. With the permission of the escort, however, other Italians may dance with girls they know. On the whole, the stricter families permit their daughters to go only to dances held in the rooms of their own clubs. These clubs are composed of members either originating in one region, such as the *Società Acerinese* or the *Società Regionale Marchigiana* (from the Marches), or holding the same political or religious affiliation, such as the *Società San Lorenzo Martire* or the *Società Benito Mussolini*. New Haven has eighty-three of these societies, each in a more or less flourishing condition. Attempts have been made from time to time to revive both the old dances and the folk songs, but as group enterprises these have not been very successful. Individual families preserve them to some extent, and when called upon to furnish an Italian program for a public celebration—Italian or cosmopolitan—they are able to contribute as their share delightful dances and singing of a caliber that testifies to the natural gift of the Italian for music.

Italians appreciate with difficulty the legal status of the lottery here. In Italy, as the first part of the chapter brings out, the lottery was not only legal but honorable. Some say that the Italian government maintains agents in the United States to run branches of its own lottery. These agents hire others to sell tickets; when one of the latter is caught and heavily penalized, the agent pays the fine.

"Does anyone in this house play the numbers?" asked a little girl of nine as she ran into a house on her way to school to distribute lottery tickets that her father or older brother had been too busy to bring around. "Yes," answered the oldest son. "I do, but I have my

ticket already." He pointed to where he had stuck it in the frame of a picture of the local priest "for luck."

Factory employees often act as agents and carry on their business during the lunch hour among their fellows. No offices are maintained, but in the small saloons where gambling of other kinds goes on freely, lottery tickets can usually be bought from the proprietor. It is likely that much of this lottery business, if not all, has no connection whatever with any foreign lottery. Gambling other than the lottery is claimed by many Italian women to be on the increase among their husbands and sons. This was heard especially during hard times, for it was a great temptation to attempt thus to add something to an inadequate income. Other forms of gambling—poker, crap, etc.—appear to be replacing the lottery, as it is known in Italy.

Newspapers, and still less books, rarely become a common form of recreation among first-generation Italians, obviously because of illiteracy. When these men and women learn how to read well enough to become citizens, however, their American teachers fondly imagine that they are planting an instrument for further education in a fertile soil. They believe that, if they only had time to follow up their students, they would find that those middle-aged folks—who at the time of their citizenship examination stumbled painfully through a few English passages—had become ardent devotees of the local public library. Such is not the case. The effort to jump this hurdle that leads to citizenship is often made mainly for the material benefits of the status and for no other reason. The little education thus gained is speedily lost. If papers are found in their homes, they are usually there for the children. The latter, nevertheless, if they have not had an opportunity for more education than that afforded by our grammar schools, usually content themselves with the "funnies," other simple features, and the featurized news of sex and crime. Both grammar- and high-school children use the public library, but books other than magazines are seldom lying about the homes of the poor. Motion-picture, wild-west, detective-

story, and other thrill periodicals outrank all others in popularity.

The recreation furnished by settlement houses has a fairly steady but limited attendance drawn chiefly from among the children of the second generation. Two of the main reasons for the relatively small attendance by adults, mostly women, are the small drains such entertainments make on their funds, and the failure of settlement workers to observe caste distinctions. The fact that the refreshments served at these affairs, even on special occasions, are not typically Italian, constitutes another but minor objection. The chief complaint in the latter regard is that wine is not permitted. The social workers do not appreciate the essential abstemiousness of the Italians together with the significant part assigned to wine in their pleasure-making, and they thus hold to their blanket condemnation of drinking. In the Y.W.C.A. and the Y.M.C.A., the maintenance of a relatively high standard of dress keeps many from participation. The free intermingling of Americans in the events of these organizations draws derogatory comment from the Italian group, who do not want their children to "go American"—a transformation that might extend dangerously opportunities for marriage.

When means permit, poor people who come from the larger towns of Italy and who had in their native land the opportunity to hear classical music, including the opera, continue to attend such performances occasionally in this country. Their knowledge of outstanding compositions probably outranks that of the average American of the same economic status.

*Paesani* occasionally present a play that has been part of the recreational life of their own town in Italy. The theme is generally one which originated in some historical event in that region. The actors may be ones who took part in performances in Italy, or their children. It is not unusual for such parts to pass on from father to son, just as at Oberammergau. The intensity of interest is, however, infinitely less among Italians, and the continuity is by no means preserved from year to year. One gains the impression that lack of gen-

eral enthusiasm, particularly any on the part of Americans, in the survival of such old-world practices accounts largely for their rapid decline. Only the religiously inspired performances associated with saints' days, the survivals of which are discussed in Chapter IX, are continued with any zest.

The Italian spirit of hospitality has survived in much of its original form and power. The only noteworthy change in practices relating to it is that in this country improved financial status enables people to offer a better type of refreshment to the occasional visitor whether it be to a *paesano*, a visiting nurse, or a settlement worker. The rule of not refusing such offerings under any pretext whatsoever holds rigidly in this country, and many a well-meaning American has ruined her prospect of making a good contact in a family by refusing the strong, sweet Italian coffee that is almost invariably the simplest form of refreshment offered. If a family does not offer refreshment, one may be sure that the process of Americanization has advanced rapidly. Conflicts can sometimes be sensed in families who feel the urge to entertain the guest in the traditional manner and yet, being recipients of grocery orders or money from a relief agency, hesitate to throw out the "budget" by feeding someone who has not been included in the estimate. One sometimes wonders if a small allowance for such entertainment would not contribute more to a family's sense of security than even such items as cigarettes, haircuts, church, etc. After all, in Italy a family would go without necessities themselves rather than omit this traditional practice.

The Italian woman has such a keen sense of fitness that the food she offers an American is usually of an American type. She sets out store pie or cake for the guest and politely nibbles at it herself, but she much prefers her own kind of scantily sweetened cake. At a lunch to which a social worker was invited, the family went so far as to provide butter, but forgot to offer it to the guest because it was not naturally a part of their own diet. The pound of butter remained in the middle of the table untouched through the meal.

Among Italians themselves, hospitality ceases when the

burden all falls on one party. Women sometimes get the reputation of going from house to house in turn to benefit from friends' hospitality, without planning to reciprocate. Such people are promptly blacklisted, so to speak, and the husband is cautioned thus: "If old Philomena she come today, you no give her nothing. She never bring nothing to you." This notion of reciprocity is carried over to the social worker from whom they receive financial assistance. Sooner or later, the latter is handed a gift, a piece of hand-crocheted lace or a paper doll. Two of the most unusual presents noted were a pair of homemade shoes, so heavy that the recipient could never use them even for hiking, and a large slippery fish, thrust all wet and unwrapped into the worker's arms on the open street. This giving of presents of food is particularly associated with religious occasions. For such fiestas women sometimes bake special dishes that are made only at that time, in honor of the saint in question; they then present these to relatives and friends.

From the foregoing discussion, regardless of the changes that immigration has brought to the Italian's means of diverting himself, the social worker can well understand the necessity for not frustrating his efforts to use some of his traditional patterns to make his life in the new world enjoyable. His hospitality practices are not so expensive and can well be encouraged as constructive competition to the all-consuming "talkies."

## CHAPTER VIII

### EDUCATION

#### *IN ITALY*

**E**DUCATION contributed but little to the South Italians' struggle for existence and for status in the Italy that our immigrants knew. The *campanilismo*—the intense regionalism—of the peasantry combined with their many economic and social handicaps to minimize its rôle in their society. *Campanilismo*, as Chapter I indicates, involved striking differences between the vernaculars of the various provinces and even between the dialects of towns within a province. Luigi Villari states that literary Italian, taught like any other foreign language, was spoken as a common language only by the inhabitants of the hill country between Pistoja and Bologna. After a child left school at the end of the third or fourth year, as did most, he took up life in an environment where he heard only his native dialect. He seldom had an opportunity to read Italian because newspapers in this language, or any for that matter, had a restricted sale in small towns and villages. Beyond a little knowledge of arithmetic and the ability to write his own name, the peasant was to all intents and purposes illiterate, regardless of his education as a child.

The law enacted in 1877 that made school attendance compulsory for all children between the ages of six and nine years, mentioned in Chapter II, functioned to spread elementary education in name at least, but the difficulties of enforcement inherent in the South Italian social structure minimized its effectiveness. Generally speaking, the law meant more in the north than in the south, in towns and villages than in the country. In 1901–2, years when large numbers of Italians were coming to this country, only 65 per cent of the children between six and nine years of age were enrolled in the elementary public and private schools. Evening schools

helped a little, and regimental schools provided elementary instruction for illiterate soldiers.

The Italian government maintained public schools of every grade and required that all private schools conform to the standards established for the state schools. No one might open a private school without state authorization. In 1911, these institutions were classified as follows:

1. *Elementary, of two divisions:* The lower, for the age range from six to nine years, according to law had to be provided in each commune, with at least one for the boys and one for the girls. Upper elementary schools were required in communes with more than 4,000 inhabitants or that had normal and secondary schools. These took care of the needs of children up to twelve years of age. In both, instruction was free and, where the latter existed, attendance required.

2. *Secondary instruction:* The *ginnasi* and *licei*, continuing respectively for five and three years, offered classical training that prepared students for university work at an average age of twenty. The technical schools, an alternative course, enrolled students for three years, a routine that led to advanced work for four years in a technical institute; with this preparation, students might then enter a university for a scientific course at an average age of nineteen.

3. *Higher education:* This included work in universities, higher institutes, and special schools that continued for from four to six years.

As previously pointed out, however, relatively few South Italians ever got beyond the lower elementary division. The following list of subjects, taken from a "Certificate of the Compulsory Examination" issued in 1904 by the Public Elementary School for Girls in the Town of Minori, suggests the scope of instruction in that division at that time:

Italian composition

Writing from dictation

Problems

Handwriting

Reading with summary of subject

Mental arithmetic

History, geography, rights and duties of citizens

Another type of school, the *asilo infantile* (day nursery), was found only exceptionally in the south. It was an urban and northern development.

A comparison of school-attendance and illiteracy figures for Italy with other countries serves to emphasize the comparative backwardness of our immigrants' native land in this respect. As the authors<sup>1</sup> of one useful book put it:

The percentage of population attending schools of all kinds [in Italy] was 8.2 in 1895, while in England and Wales at the same date it was 17.5, in France 16, in Prussia 15.6, even in Spain 10.5. . . . Between two-fifths and one-half of the adult population are still illiterate, and in the South the proportion probably reaches to at least three-quarters. Among the Italian immigrants into the United States the percentage of illiteracy is 46, while that of the Germans is less than 3.

Another writer<sup>2</sup> notes that among the immigrants in the years 1899–1910 the percentage of South Italian illiterates of fourteen years and over was 53.9.

School sessions usually lasted from the first of September to the middle of June. Country schools were, of course, exceptions to this as to so many rules. Peasants' children had to help with the crops. School was usually held daily, including Saturday but excluding Thursday afternoons, from eight to twelve and from one to four o'clock. Some southerners state that their afternoon sessions never commenced until two o'clock, because they had to have their siesta.

School buildings were not of modern construction and often had poor equipment. A native<sup>3</sup> describes the situation in 1902 as follows:

The poverty of elementary schools is very great; they are held often in unsanitary buildings, and possess few maps or specimens for ob-

1. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *Italy Today*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, pp. 284–285.

2. J. H. Mariano, *The Second Generation of Italians in New York City*, Boston, Christopher Publishing House, 1921, p. 57.

3. Luigi Villari, "Italian Life in Town and Country," in *The Nation*, New York, November 20, 1902, p. 405.

ject-lessons, and yet they cost the communes \$15,000,000, of which the Government grants \$325,000. The teachers, who are trained for their work in special colleges, are badly paid. The average salary for a man is from \$140 to \$265 per annum; a woman receives from \$110 to \$210 at most. . . .

There are no games or sports in common at any of the public schools; the boys are very insufficiently trained in gymnastics, of which there are classes twice weekly, but from which they are easily excused on very futile pleas. We have known parents to get a medical certificate so that their boys should not run the risk of catching cold after getting heated by the prescribed exercise. Friendships are not made at school; the boys of good family keep strictly aloof from those of inferior social rank.

The lack of heat in the schools, a point that Chapter III discusses, added to the discomfort due to unsanitary and otherwise unattractive conditions. The clothing requirements militated against the attendance of many children from poor families (see Chapter V).

One of the writers on Italy, Joseph Collins,<sup>4</sup> claims that this lack of educational advantages, the "curse of the Italian peasantry," was "fostered by the church." He continues thus:

Whether or not it is in reality, each one who contemplates the matter must decide for himself. Certain it is that the church is adverse that its adherents shall conform to the law which says that every Italian child shall attend school a stated time for a certain number of years. Their reason for this aduerseness is that such education is devoid of any religious character, and in reality tends, occultly or openly, to teach that which is subversive of the church's authority.

Since the American parochial school had few counterparts in Italy, the church had to further its doctrines through the personal contacts of its priests rather than through daily inculcation. As Collins<sup>5</sup> notes:

4. *My Italian Year*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919, p. 53.  
5. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The great ambition of the *contadini* [peasants] is to have one of his sons enter the priesthood; less frequently one of his daughters enters a sisterhood. The church fosters this ambition and succors the parent in carrying it out. Four-fifths of the priesthood of Italy is recruited from *il popolo* [the common people], the *contadini* and the laboring classes. Hence the intellectual limitations of the rank and file of this profession.

The equivalent in Italy of the American parochial school was a private institution where girls were taught by nuns and boys by priests. The boys' school was generally known as a seminary, the girls', as a convent. These were not common.

Not only were separate schools provided for boys and girls, but the teachers in each were almost invariably of the same sex as their pupils. While a woman was occasionally found teaching in a boys' school, it was only in the lower grades. Male instruction of girls, however, was quite rare in South Italy. Men could not teach sewing and cooking, the things a girl had to learn. Since most of a teacher's salary was paid by the commune or town, the committee on appointments preferred to hire a native rather than a stranger. Married women were not excluded from teaching; one often hears an Italian in this country say that his mother held such a job in the old country. In the smaller and poorer towns that had but one building, a woman teacher met the girls in the morning, and a man taught the boys in the afternoon.

Methods of obtaining discipline varied widely in the different schools. In Sicily, teachers frequently resorted to striking their pupils over the knuckles with a stick. They also used, at times, a punishment known as *sputazza o nasu* (spitting on the nose). This involved having a good scholar stand before the culprit, lick his own finger, pass it over the other's nose, and then stick a small piece of paper to the moistened part. Since to spit on a person was a gesture of extreme contempt, this punishment was held in great dread. Sometimes, too, children had to kneel in the corner of a room for a tiresome period. In South Italy, as in so many other parts of the world, the expedient of keeping recalcitrant

children after school was a popular disciplinary device. As parents were usually impatiently awaiting their children's return so that they might set them to doing necessary tasks, southern teachers were obliged to use this method sparingly.

In discussing education, the fact must not be overlooked that South Italians could see little political prestige to be gained from literary ability. As a Sicilian is paraphrased as saying it,<sup>6</sup> "as far as politics are concerned people of his class have practically nothing to say so he never bothered his head about it." In Italy, politics for such a man as this—a miner from Girkgenti in Sicily—was restricted to minor affairs in his own small village. Information on which to base his decisions was handed around verbally. It changed content as it traveled and became mere hearsay, but it satisfied his needs. Those interested in local or even national affairs gathered around the apothecary's door or in the lawyer's small office to listen to the news as told by those literates. Many were impeded, however, by time and distance from sharing in this privilege; others thought that too much learning opened the mind for unhealthy dreams. Some regarded any increase in the complexity of their civilization much as did a peasant who called the use of machines an attempt to "go ahead of the Eternal Father, who therefore punishes him with bad harvests."<sup>7</sup> With that inertia so characteristic of people living in the greatest poverty from generation to generation, these peasants felt that the only security obtainable resulted from following closely those rules of life that had been derived from their forefathers.

#### IN AMERICA

COMING from such a background and confronted with the pressing need for making drastic adaptations to his new environment, the Italian immigrant to America speedily surrounded education with a glamour that until recently made

6. By Paul Radin in *The Italians of San Francisco*, SERA project 2-2F-98, San Francisco, Part I, July, 1935, p. 97.

7. V. di Somma, "Dell'economia rurale nel mezzogiorno," *Nuova Antologia*, March 16, 1906, p. 807.

him almost entirely uncritical both of subjects taught and of the system followed in our schools. The free advanced teaching provided here represents privileges that were previously unattainable by members of his class. To his mind, education thus acts as a magic wand that fits everyone for some pleasant and well-paying position. It is one of the strong lures that brought and still brings thousands to this country.

Their personal handicaps and the social pressures present in this country have made illiterates concentrate upon the education of their children rather than upon jumping the literacy hurdles themselves. In going through the instructional prerequisites to citizenship, they fulfil the letter of the ordinary status requirement of being nominally literate. They cannot often, however, read fiction or even newspapers, although the latter might aid them to gain an understanding of this country and its problems. The poorest families sacrifice to get their first child or two through grammar school and then make these children—as soon as they can get working papers—help carry the education of their younger brothers and sisters at least as far, preferably farther. After all this investment has been made, those who complete a secondary training are expected to obtain better positions and salaries, especially “white collar” positions. Reports of school attendance for 1931–35 by nationality indicate that children of Italian stock showed a marked trend away from trade and into commercial schools. In the case of children of American stock, however, trade schools increased in popularity over the high and commercial schools. Parents, particularly Italian parents, “have been carried away by the false pride which saw something in the office worker much superior to the child who worked with his hands.”<sup>8</sup>

Early marriages and disillusionment with what high-school graduates may earn with their equipment frequently terminate carefully worked-out family educational programs.

8. Report of survey of vocational training made by the Manufacturers' Association of Hartford County, Conn., in the *Meriden Morning Record*, October 10, 1936. The bias of the statement fits the typical motives of employers.

Early marriages by older children may break family ties or at least make the parents modify their evaluation of educational attainments. When the latter takes place, the parents too often present to the social worker a markedly apathetic point of view on the whole problem. Disillusionment over the results of their sacrifices is especially observable during depressed economic years when competition for the all-important "white collar" jobs is particularly bitter.

Fewer girls than boys go on to high and commercial schools. Most Italian mothers still believe that girls do not need education "like a boy, because they are going to marry and should know about a house." When a girl leaves grammar school in America, however, she frequently enters a factory rather than attempts to learn housekeeping. To remain at home from both school and work raises a girl's status in Italians' eyes. Most lessons in housework are casually absorbed in the course of each day whether the girl attends school, works, or remains at home like a veritable *signorina* (young lady). An Italian home in America requires more attention than did one in Italy, but it is still run more simply than most American domestic establishments.

The recent introduction of instruction in the Italian language in public-school curricula did not, in many cases, bring the expected favorable reaction among people of Italian stock. "It is all right for Americans," one Italian boy asserted; "they are not 'wops.'" Dr. Bessie B. Wessel,<sup>9</sup> in her *Ethnic Survey of Woonsocket, Rhode Island*, found that Italians and Jews are the two groups of those found in that city which most rapidly relinquish their native tongues. She reports that the following percentages of children from the different ethnic stocks were bilingual or multilingual: French-Canadian, 98.0; Slav, 97.0; Italian, 93.4; and Jewish, 88.5. The scene of this study, however, was not typical and did not bring into account in this connection other significant aspects of the language retention problem.

In coping with unruly pupils, school authorities similarly neglect the cultural factor. They do not realize the malad-

9. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1931, p. 200.

justments precipitated in immigrant homes by their practices. They have not only eliminated corporal punishment gradually from their school practices but have also reached out and censured the use of the rod by parents. Teachers now keep recalcitrants after school or send them to the principal for "a good scolding." The Italian father, nevertheless, faces this dilemma: "If I beat my Tony, he tell the teacher and she send the cop to my house." As Chapter VI points out, the children rapidly become aware of this support and take advantage of it in dealing with their parents. The parents, not knowing how to discipline their children by other than physical "persuasion," conclude that the book-learned spinsters in the school provide a very inadequate substitute for the old-fashioned methods.

Current theories of child training in American schools stress the pupil's rôle as an individual rather than as a group member. Teachers frequently expect the American-born child of Italian stock to manifest purely American traits, to have sloughed off almost all of the culturally determined personality traits that characterize his parents. When they attribute any variation to ethnic differences, they usually do so in the case of a vice rather than of a virtue—in a typically ethnocentric fashion. "In schools attended by immigrants from Ireland or South Italy, teachers are always ready to bear testimony to the unusual number of quarrels, blows, and bouts of temper among the pupils in their charge."<sup>10</sup> They are likely to allow this Irish or South Italian "racial" trait to weigh heavily in their characterization of the "innate" aptitudes of such children. "To most teachers, in New England at least, the word 'nationality' signifies a political concept. To most immigrant groups the word 'nationality' represents an ethnic concept," observes Doctor Wessel. Because of this difference, many teachers fancy that they may change an Italian into an American by instructing him in the principles of American government. They think that, no matter how much a child may revere Garibaldi in his home, he can

10. Cyril Burt, *The Young Delinquent*, New York, D. Appleton & Co., 1931, pp. 416-417.

become a One Hundred Per Cent American by having reverence for George Washington drilled into him. A little knowledge of Italian human geography, literature, and a few words of the language would help to adapt these pupils more easily to their environment and their teachers to the problems involved in teaching them. "Teachers," asserted a Sicilian, "often speak as if Sicily were quite a different place from Italy, and give the impression that it does not belong to the Italian kingdom at all." This is a sore spot; it points to a gulf that Sicilians would like to eliminate in order to equate their status with that of the continental Italians.

The parochial schools of America foster cultural isolation to some extent, but the Italian children have not formed a large proportion of the students enrolled in them. Economic, religious, and linguistic factors all contribute to this situation. The parochial schools here are conducted by the Irish, Polish, and French Roman Catholic churches chiefly, only a few by those of the Italian Catholics. Italians do not want their children to be a minority element in a school established to serve the traditions of another ethnic group. Since they have not been able to finance many parochial schools of their own, they have selected the public schools as the lesser of the two available evils.

Adult education as it exists in citizenship schools has, until comparatively recently, been conducted on the theory that "if they were citizens all would be well." Americanization has thus been a mass affair with little regard for whether Italians, Poles, or Greeks were being subjected to the cure-all process. What if these different ethnic stocks did have widely variant traditions and ideals? All that would be taken care of by giving them a new, beautifully standardized set. The *New Haven City Year Book* for 1929<sup>11</sup> defines the aim of its adult education department thus: "to prepare adults for life in this city and nation by an understanding of the principles and ideals of this Democracy, through an acquaintance with the characters of the founders of the nation; through a free discussion of Current Events, of American History and Gov-

ernment." Familiarity with such subjects is prescribed as necessary to get through the naturalization tests and probably gives the immigrant a sense of belonging, but it barely starts him on the tedious and painful road to adjustment in American culture. The adult, after all, is much more interested in the rights and privileges appertaining to citizenship than in becoming an American culturally. The course seldom motivates him to study further out of sheer desire for enlightenment; but then, few courses of any kind accomplish this exciting transformation. At any rate, "immigrant education has frequently been a humanizing movement for pupil, teacher, and community alike."<sup>12</sup> The pictures and cartoons in newspapers and magazines, and especially the "talkies," as the preceding chapter notes, have more marked influence in speeding the Americanization process than do such formal educational programs.

In all educational matters, immediate needs and economic demands weigh heavily in the minds of first-generation parents. Only exceptionally can some be found who can look forward to aiding sons through long years of schooling leading to a college or professional degree. The harvest must wait too long for the reaping. The average father, too, senses the widening gap between his children's interests and his own. If the gap is not too wide, he is proud that he has helped to shove his children along; but it must not be too wide. Conversation in the home traditionally centers about a few restricted topics. When children introduce variations on the themes, many parents find themselves unable either to join in or even to understand fully the drift of the comments. They do not wish to have the feeling that their efforts have pushed their children beyond their spheres.

12. Read Lewis, "Adult Education and the Foreign Born," in *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*, New York, American Association for Adult Education, 1934, p. 60.

## CHAPTER IX

### RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION

#### *IN ITALY*

THE religious practices of the South Italians preserved in modified form many elements found associated with ancient Greek, Roman, and Mohammedan beliefs. In the Italian homeland, this was particularly apparent in the country districts. Christianity, like most social innovations, first found acceptance in the cities and towns. The word pagan, derived from *paganus*, meaning a peasant or country dweller, thus recalls the early conflict between the Christianity of the urban places and the worship of pagan deities by rustics. The conversion of the peasants came gradually and never involved much more than changes in outward form. Their unwritten beliefs, their folk superstitions, persisted through the centuries.

Many aspects of the ritual and creed observed by the South Italians thus differed not only from those of other European peoples, although nominally Roman Catholic, but also from those of the North Italians. From Rome northward, the whole culture resembled more closely other European forms. The people south of Rome preserved many fundamental characteristics of pagan civilization. The worship of objects, such as statues and sacred relics, and the attributing of specific powers and qualities to individual saints reflected the earlier religions. Saint Rocco protected devotees against illness, Saint Lucy guarded their eyesight, and Saint Anna helped during the pangs and dangers of childbirth. Some practices, like the season of semireligious rejoicing known as Carnival Week—a transformation of the sacred festival of the Saturnalia—were also found elsewhere. The Sicilian custom of sending forth the dead into the presence of God unshod, however, did not occur in the north and recalls the manner in which Mohammedans leave their shoes

outside the mosque door when entering to commune with Allah.

Where did the southern saints come from? How did they receive their names? Many of them appear neither in the Bible nor in the writings of the early Christian Fathers. As a matter of fact, they were folk substitutes for the old Greek and Roman gods and spirits of the woods and rivers. Even their representations in wood and stone preserved the Greek and Roman facial types and, in the case of Saint Michael, the Roman dress of a legionary. "A statue of Ariadne on the banks of a stream near Monteleone in Southern Italy is used today as Saint Venere," and the "torso of Saint Helena in the church of Saint Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, probably once belonged to a statue of Juno with a scepter in the right hand and a vase in the left."<sup>1</sup> Every Italian child had a guardian angel to watch over him. This angel, who hid his face under his wings to avoid seeing any wrongdoing by his charge, was a transformation of the tutelary spirit, a "belief that goes back to Jewish or Chaldean traditions."<sup>2</sup> The house-spirit—called *Monacello* (Little Monk)—"whose diminutive wooden image is found in so many peasants' houses in the neighborhood of Naples and Salerno, is a survival of the Roman Lar."<sup>3</sup>

The polytheism of the old departmental deities survived in the veneration of local saints. Italian cities thus had as patronesses numerous Madonnas who did not spring from the conception of the Virgin Mary. While their personality as represented by one particular image was not always that of a transformed goddess of the forest or grotto, the Madonna or other saint was either this or a historical character whose past was associated with that of the town or village. The Madonna delle Virgine was the patron saint of Scafati; Sant' Anna protected Ruvo del Monte, a small town in the province of Potenza; and Sant' Aniello (the wicked saint) was

1. J. G. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion*, New York, Longmans, Green & Co., 1931, p. 242.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the patron of a little hamlet near Sorrento. The origin of the latter saint was obscure, but his life and ultimate canonization were probably associated with the history of the town.

Renan, in his *Les Saints, successeurs des dieux*, remarks that when a peasant prays to a particular saint for a cure for his horse or drops a coin into the box of a miraculous chapel, he is in the act pagan. He is satisfying a need with a religious practice that is older than Christianity and so deeply seated that Christianity has not replaced it.

Men whose ways of life approach an elemental or primitive level have a greater tendency to imbue deities with their own characteristics than do the more sophisticated. The South Italian peasant often approached his guardian saints almost as he did his fellowmen. "In proportion to the number of these new divinities, and the subdivision of their power and functions, their supposed elevation above the rank and condition of mankind grew less. Mankind grew less afraid of applying to them for trifles; and suitable engines of importunity, oblations, ornaments, and pecuniary presents to themselves or their accredited servants, became the recognized and usual way of seeking for . . . worldly favors."<sup>4</sup> In Sicily, if the patron of fishing—Saint Francesco di Paolo—did not produce a shoal of tuna fish at the proper time, his statue was taken from its niche down to the beach. There the fishermen gathered and threatened, "*Ah ca vi buddamu!*" ("Ah, we will duck you if—").<sup>5</sup> During an eruption of Vesuvius, when all prayers to the city's patron (Saint Gennaro) failed to stem the stream of lava headed for Naples, his image was placed in the path of the stream. "You can either die, or save us," the people shouted. The saint raised two more fingers, and the flow of lava turned aside into the sea. Though the original statue as it stands today in the crypt of the Church of the Vescuvato has only two fingers raised, an-

4. J. J. Blunt, *Vestiges of Ancient Manners and Customs, discoverable in modern Italy and Sicily*, London, John Murray, 1828, p. 8.

5. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, A. Reber, 1918, Vol. XXV, p. 379.

other was erected as a thank offering on the spot where the miracle was said to have occurred. The latter has four fingers stretched upward.

The legend associated with Saint Gennaro's relics further illustrates these characteristic beliefs. During his life in Naples, he received no recognition until his teachings brought him into conflict with the authorities, and, like many another, he lost his head. The execution was performed on a stone at Pozzuoli (a village near Naples), and the head was thrown into the sea. A devout woman who knew him collected the blood spilt on the stone, put it into two bottles, and hid them away. A year or two later she observed that the blood, which had congealed, turned into a liquid on the anniversary of the execution. After awaiting a second anniversary to verify her discovery, she took the bottles to the bishop of the city, who at once recognized their miraculous nature. Gennaro was canonized and appointed protector of the city. A fisherman had meanwhile, so the legend runs, found the saint's head. This the bishop caused to be covered with gold and fixed on a bust. Each year on the anniversary of the miracle, the golden image and the two bottles were brought into the body of the church from the crypt. The people waited in eager anticipation for the blood to change. If the miracle was long delayed, they regarded it as a bad omen for the coming year. In 1914, a coincidence served to bolster the bottles' repute, and the process was slow. The people vilified their patron for some minutes until the liquid appeared.

During the annual celebration of a town's patron saint, it was customary to take the image from the church and carry it in procession through the streets. Usually a society, named for the saint, looked after the business part of the occasion and furnished bearers, music, and fireworks. The Santa Maddalena Society, for example, was named for the patroness of the little town of Atrani, near Naples. Devotees with thank offerings to make frequently took the opportunity to lay their gifts at the saint's feet during the procession. Such gifts included money, jewels, and even a bride's wedding dress, an offering much cherished by the donor and highly

esteemed by the people for its socioreligious significance. The personal clothing of sick persons was also brought on these occasions and laid at the foot of the statue; when the garments were again worn, the virtue of the saint flowed into the body of the supplicant and restored health.

Offerings asking for mercies or giving thanks for them during these processions, like those found in most Italian churches today, assumed a wide variety of forms. In Palermo, Sicily, such articles could still be bought in the early years of the twentieth century under the name of *miracoli* (miracles) in a shop near the Teatro Santa Cecilia. This shop's sign boasted: "*Qui si fanno miracoli*" ("Miracles are done here"). These ex-voto offerings frequently symbolized the occasion. Wax, cheese, dough, silver, or clay shapes modeled after parts of the human body or even of animals were used. Pitrè<sup>6</sup> also includes in his list a horse made of dough, a horse's hoof of clay, and a censer carved from cheese. Each statue of Saint Lucy furnished her with a platter on which supplicants might place their clay or wax models of eyes. Sometimes recipients of a saint's favors presented a picture of the miracle for which they were grateful. These alleged examples of the special suspension of natural laws involved landslides, bolts of lightning, thieves, and would-be violators of maidenly virtue. Perhaps the most curious of all the ex-voto offerings, however, were the loaves and cakes with hard-boiled eggs set into them, found at Easter time in all Italian *pizzerie* (bake shops). They were shaped like dolls, monks, animals, and symbolic figures and devices and used to be manufactured solely by monks and nuns.<sup>7</sup> The egg here had the same traditional reference to life and awakening life processes as it does in Greek mythology and in the case of Easter eggs in this country.

Certain practices were rather generally associated with the celebration of patron saints' holidays in South Italy, but others were local products. Flags, banners, and bright shawls usually decked the houses and especially the balconies along

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 177 ff.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

the chosen statue's route. Throngs of people in gala attire showered the statue with flowers and chanted hymns in the patron's honor. They gladly gave a small contribution to the church and the saint's society in order to help cover the expense of the celebration. The event, like all semireligious functions of the kind, ended with dancing that often lasted far into the evening. To such customs, the little town of Polizzi Generosa in Sicily added the lowering into the street of children dressed as angels, supported by ropes from the balconies, as the statue was borne past. In connection with the Feast of Saint Gerardo, patron of Potenza, the people reflected their town's history in their procession of Turks.

Such feast-day ceremonies functioned as one of the chief forms of recreation for the inhabitants of small towns and villages. From the economic viewpoint, they represented sizable drains on the group both in money and in time. A feast often continued for several days during which no work was done.<sup>8</sup> In order to support these celebrations and to have a few *soldi* to spend at the stalls set up in the streets, the South Italian had to save for months; he had to live on the most meager fare both before and after the feast days.

The Roman Catholic churches in Italy were not entirely, as in America, dependent on gifts by supporters. For centuries, kings and princes gave large sums both to found new churches and to assure their support. While it might be pointed out that these funds were squeezed from the toil of the exploited peasant, the Italian seldom reached the point of placing this interpretation upon the wealth of the Church or of his parish. His own giving sprang from real feelings of need and gratitude rather than of compulsion. The Italian government in 1873 took over all the properties of the Church and allotted sums to priests who did not have other or adequate income. Certain fees and parishioners' contributions and the priest's discretionary power or influence over them, however, were still elastic. Despite the relative finan-

8. Chapter VII, in describing recreation and hospitality practices, dwells in more detail upon the South Italian's extraordinary catalogue of festivals and their cost.

cial independence of the Italian parish, the fact that the local priest was usually related to one of the village families helped to maintain the personal contact of the church with the peasants. The priest's relatives aided in making his charge profitable and in adding to his reputation as a faithful shepherd, for they gained by the connection both in prestige and in material goods. Since canonical rule provided that no priest might take into his service a woman under forty years of age, the rôle of relatives was accentuated by the appointment of an elderly cousin or aunt to the position of house-keeper. Other members expected small perquisites in the shape of produce from garden and orchard. The priest might close his eyes to many superstitious practices and might even promote them because of their economic or other contribution to his status, but he usually stood as a friend of the people. He had an understanding of their needs and sorrows that no one else had the time or inclination to learn and share. The priest "may not help them, but he at least shares in their sufferings. He treats them as human beings, and comforts them with the expectation of a justice in a future world, which shall compensate for the injustices of the present one."<sup>9</sup>

The mild climate and the proximity of the village church in South Italy permitted regular attendance. The mores, backed as they were by societal compulsion, assured it. The Sicilian reproof, "Are you a Turk that you do not go to church?" suggests both the weight of popular sentiment against this violation of the mores and the persistence of the Turk in their ideology.

Another aspect of the South Italian's adjustment to his spirit world involved modes of belief and action not countenanced by the Roman Catholic Church. Due to popular confusion, these superstitious practices—largely ways of coping with the *jettatura* or *mal'occhio* (evil eye)<sup>10</sup>—nevertheless tended to overlap the accepted religious ones. These black-magic devices may be traced to pre-Christian customs that

9. L. Franchetti e S. Sonnino, *La Sicilia nel 1876*, Florence, Valecchi, 1925, Vol. II, p. 144.

10. Also known as the *occhio cattivo* and *occhio triste* (bad eye, sad eye).

formed far too basic a part of the mental life of the people to be brushed lightly aside, but that the Christian hierarchy refused to recognize officially or to replace with substitutes. The mental outfit of which the *jettatura* was an outstanding preoccupation represented the fundamental attitude of older Italians toward many life situations. They were incapable of looking upon misfortune as something precipitated by natural causation, as due to lack of foresight, error, or the entrance into the situation of forces over which they had no control. Rather did they think in terms of specific human causation and attributed mishaps to the influence of an ever-present menace, the power of envy. This force became effective through the *occhio cattivo* and, to a less extent, through witches.

The South Italian thought of the Evil Eye as a power in-born in certain men and women, who by a mere glance could cause physical injury, business reverses, sickness, and even death.<sup>11</sup> The possessors of this mystic force acquired it unknowingly. It was found in the child whose mother during pregnancy turned around in church at the elevation of the Host; it occurred in the unfortunate being born on Christmas Eve and in certain of those who committed any of the numerous possible infractions of the social and religious codes. These people were in all other respects ordinary human beings, who married and had children and lived otherwise uneventful lives. No benefit was reaped from the fatal gift; on the contrary, those possessing it were feared and, where possible, avoided by their fellowmen. A person possessing the "eyes" (the common term in America for the *mal'occhio*) could generally be recognized by certain signs, the most typical of which were eyebrows joined in an unbroken line and a cadaverous, olive-skinned face. A person with eyes differing in color also came under strong suspicion, and a female hunch-

11. This conception bears some faint resemblance to the much milder American notion, "a dirty look," which is at least recognized as of evil intent. Such statements as "She looked at him as if she could kill him" and "Her look pierced his very soul" suggests that we have something of the *mal'occhio* idea despite our alleged enlightenment.



No. 1 Hand-making Worms



No. 2 Scissors



No. 3 The Hunchback



No. 4 Worm



No. 5 Worm



No. 6 Booty



No. 7 Fish



No. 8 Worm

### Amulets to Avert the Evil Eye.

(Nos. 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8 are of gilded tin; No. 4 is a piece of natural coral;  
No. 5 is of a black composition.)



back (but not a male) was carefully to be avoided. Sometimes the afflicted person revealed his nature by an act or by failure to do some expected thing. Woe to the person who failed to say "*Dio benedica*" ("God bless you") after any expression of admiration for a healthy or pretty child, an acknowledgment of talent, a hope for success in a young man or woman, or a wish of happiness for a newly married pair. This omission immediately branded the person as one possessing the Evil Eye.

The set of avoidance practices and the ritual which have been evolved to cope with this theory of causation referred chiefly to marriage, the procreation of children, and the behavior of female domestic animals. Even inanimate objects, however, might undergo a change by which they were rendered useless or might even be lost entirely. To ward off such ills, the common people wore many kinds of amulets. A collection of these devices by Joseph Bellucci of Naples consists of over two thousand different articles. As among more primitive peoples, the Italians considered natural weapons, symbols of beasts' horns, claws, and teeth, the most effective protections against the Evil Eye. *Cornicelli* (little horns), a most satisfactory symbol, might be of coral, silver, gold, bone, ivory, or lava; or the actual horns of an animal itself might be used. Fish, scissors, knives, and a male but not a female hunchback were common emblems. These were found everywhere, over doors, inside and outside houses, and in shops, banks, wine cellars, and especially bedrooms. They were pinned on the clothing of infants and children and hung on cords around the necks of girls and women. Men carried them in their coat pockets or sewn into their clothing. They were fastened on the harness of draught animals, carved on carts and fishing boats, used as the handle of walking sticks, and painted on the dinnerware of the rich.

If a person suspected of having the *mal'occhio* approached, the amulet was grasped firmly and pointed secretly in his direction. Lacking an amulet, the first and little fingers might

be extended from the clenched fist to represent a set of horns.<sup>12</sup> So potent was the horn that the mere mention of the word, in the absence of an amulet, was thought an adequate protection. These acts were always performed secretly. It was insulting to impute the Evil Eye to anyone. Such an affront attracted the malicious glance in all its power.

Survivals perhaps even more primitive than these centered about the South Italian's belief in wizards and witches. These were men and women, known as *maghi* and *maghe* (singular, *mago* and *maga*), who did not always work evil. They might be herb doctors skilled in the art of folk medicine, but they also included those reputed to have a knowledge of harmful black arts. They healed diseases, mended broken hearts, dissolved spells, and even caused men to pine away and die. The nature of the most potent charms, it was said, might be disclosed to others only on Easter or Christmas Eve. Otherwise the magic gift would disappear. This knowledge brought prestige as well as a small though irregular source of income.

In Sicily, witches were known as *donne di fuora* (strange women) or *strii*; among the Neapolitans they were called *ian-nare* or *jannare*. Their headquarters in South Italy were at Benevento. There, it was said, they held midnight sessions in the branches of some famous nut trees, presided over by the head witch or the Evil One himself. The Neapolitan folk rhyme regarding witches flying "*sopra li noci di Benevento*" ("over the nut trees of Benevento") is mentioned in Chapter I in another connection. After the witches received their instructions there, they went around the villages seeking to do harm either because they had a grudge against someone or "just for the devil of it." Householders protected themselves by putting salt or garlic in the keyhole, on the window sills, and at the threshold of the door to ward off such nightly visitations. A broom placed behind the door was another preventive measure. As these practices suggest, few had the temerity to sleep with their windows open; those who have forgotten the superstition claim that they keep them closed at night because the night air is injurious. An American physi-

12. See illustration for an amulet depicting this gesture.

cian who attempted to convince Italian peasants of the benefits of an open window at night said that their prejudices made it "a task for a modern Hercules."<sup>18</sup>

These witches did not come from a supernatural world; they were human beings with a dual personality. A man might go to bed with his wife and then wake up in the night to find her gone. He thus knew that she was a witch, and however much he might love her human personality there were no steps he would not take to cope with her supernatural self.

A Faiichiano (peasant from Faiichio) whose wife disappeared from his bed night after night went to a *maga* for advice. She bade him look under the bed for the pot of magic salve that his wife smeared on her body to enable her to fly. This he was told to exchange for a harmless ointment and await the result. He did as he was bid and, finding the magic paste, replaced it with a jar of ordinary ointment. The following night, after his wife had anointed herself, she poised on the window ledge as if to take off on a flight into the night sky. Instead of soaring upward, she fell heavily to the ground. Her husband found her lying on the street with a broken leg.

This story is typical and was told as though it was based on fact. Others warned that if a mother did not ask the permission of the witches before lifting her child from its cradle the baby would fall ill or be carried off and a changeling left in its place. The altered appearance of a baby suffering from cholera infantum or malnutrition was not infrequently imputed to the substitution of an elfin for a human child. Such tales still disturb the minds of Italians in America. Devices preventive of such supernatural trickery included a small vessel of holy water (blessed at church on Palm Sunday) kept at the head of the bed, a palm fastened outside the house or under the mattress, salt strewn in the marriage bed, and a cross made on each loaf of bread before it was set to rise. These particular charms respectively warded off miscellaneous evil spells, assured health, ensured a large family, and guaranteed a successful batch of bread.

18. Joseph Collins, *My Italian Year*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, p. 10.

These facts extend our notion of the South Italian's brooding suspiciousness beyond the sphere of observation, even beyond the unwitting malevolence of those possessing the Evil Eye. He distrusted both the intentional and unintentional actions of his associates, and then—as though not satisfied with these terrifying possibilities—believed that he must cope with the erratic conduct of wizards and witches and of the saintly substitutes for the ancient pantheon of deities and spirits.

#### *IN AMERICA*

WHEN South Italians began to stream across the Atlantic in the 1880's, they realized that they might be severing themselves permanently from their native land, but they found some comfort in the thought that their religion went with them. None imagined that their beliefs would undergo change, that their eternal truths would adjust to new life conditions. They usually had to leave household goods behind for want of transportation money, but their saints and Madonnas could be borne over the thousands of miles of ocean locked in their hearts and, where possible, also securely packed in their bundles. Although they hoped to accumulate a surplus sufficient to support them in old age near the church in their native village, few could foresee the bonds that would come to bind them firmly to American soil and to weaken the hold of the old home. As they toiled in America amid the din and grime of factories, an occasional touch of the familiar amulet (now worn under the shirt instead of outside it) brought new courage with which to face the nameless dread created by the myriad aspects of American life. And in the dark, close rooms they now called home, their women fought heartbreaking loneliness by gazing now and then at the image of a beloved patron saint as they fumbled with the strange gear of American domestic economy.

Roman Catholicism had millions of followers in America when the South Italians began to arrive, but it was strongly influenced by Irish traditions. Despite a common nominal adherence to the dogmas of Rome, fundamental differences in

both conception and ritual immediately appeared between the Irish and the Italians, differences sharply accentuated by language. As soon as any Italian group's finances barely permitted, therefore, a parish and church along South Italian lines was established. At first many of these priests came from South Italy, but, as it became apparent to the American hierarchy that these clerics were less acculturated to the Catholic faith as observed by the majority in this country, North Italian priests were appointed in great numbers.

Despite the establishment of Italian churches, the immigrant attitude toward religion shortly began to show the effects of contact with a number of different sects, with the "chill winds of indifferentism and irreligion,"<sup>14</sup> with the manner in which Americans generally depend more upon lay specialists—physicians, ward bosses, lawyers, etc.—than upon saints, priests, and witches, and with the predominant commercialism of American philosophy. The Italian does not understand, too, the necessity of paying for church services in America at the door in advance, an adjustment the Irish had long since made. While this is "just like the movies," the analogy throws the whole matter of worship into a somewhat new and strange light. He finds, again, that the parish church is no longer "just across the street"<sup>15</sup> but often at a distance of several or many long city blocks. In the bitter winters of New England and other northern districts, such distances constitute a serious undertaking for elderly people and frequently oblige them to limit their attendance to times when weather conditions permit. Other practices militating against regular church attendance rapidly develop or are borrowed. The South Italians borrow the American custom of a big Sunday meal and find that daughters working in clothing factories all week long insist upon resting Sunday morning rather than helping their mothers as they would have done in

14. R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1919, p. 897.

15. Although Italian communities build their churches in districts predominantly Italian, all families cannot cluster in the immediate vicinity. In Italy, even small villages may have several churches so that no matter where one lives a place of worship is always nearby.

Italy. The American standard of living requires more time for the embellishment of the person. Sunday morning, therefore, becomes a satisfactory leisure time for manicuring and hair arrangement, for the care of the body instead of the soul. In Italy, on the other hand, a girl with carefully manicured hands was looked upon as totally unfitted for the sole destiny of the female—marriage and housekeeping. The pressure of the factory system is felt no less by the men, who come to look upon the Sunday respite as a day of preparation for the rigors of the coming week.

While first-generation immigrants regard their faith and ritual more rigidly, the foregoing considerations, and especially those affecting their descendants, breed both conflict between the generations and modifications of the old people's viewpoints. The economic test plays a particularly significant rôle among the second and third generations. The latter discover that employment and even more general social recognition no longer depend upon church attendance. The old function of certain religious practices as emotional outlets has numerous competitors in this new land. The youngsters individualize their conceptions of their part in American life, and no longer face the group responsibilities that so long formed a normal part of the community life of their parents. To South Italians, responsibility for the poor and sick carries with it a religious compulsion and acts as one of the strong bonds that hold them together. To the young, the insurance value of this expedient is no longer apparent. Among the older immigrants, some aspects of the Church's ritual serve to retard assimilation; but its strong opposition to divorce, and to marriage by civil ceremony alone, represents a type of discipline that has utility but that their children attempt to avoid. While the Italian in his home country could not have paid the fees required here for certain offices of the Church but would now find them far from burdensome, he evaluates them in terms of the relatively slight social penalties for non-observance. In neglecting these commands of the Church, he rationalizes that he cannot even with his higher income pay

for what he no longer regards as necessary to his advancement either in this world or in the hereafter.

A close examination of the fate of religious practices in this country reveals that those dealing with the celebration of some religious or secular event tend to survive more readily than do others. The South Italian clings to them both for the pleasure they give and for the opportunity thus offered of renewing or maintaining his identification with people and activities familiar to him. The feast-day celebrations of the patron saints, therefore, are conducted in much the same fashion as they were in Italy, with church services followed by processions through the streets of the district. The devotees still make offerings during the march, ask or recognize favors in the traditional way, and then end the affair with fireworks, music, singing, and feasting. Practically every American town with an Italian community of any size and wealth observes one or more occasions of this nature, with the saints chosen that represent the largest homeland groups. New Yorkers hold two of the outstanding ones, the Feast of the Madonna del Carmine<sup>16</sup> on July 16 and the Feast of San Gandalfo, patron of the little Sicilian town of Polizzi Generosa, on September 14, 15, and 16.

During the Feast of the Madonna del Carmine, in recognition of the Madonna's healing powers wax offerings in the shape of human limbs and parts of the body are brought and laid on the altar at each of the several masses that take place throughout the morning. Each supplicant receives in return a scapular. People come from distant states to share in this celebration, and as the first mass begins at four o'clock in the morning, even many nearby pilgrims set out on the previous

16. *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. X, p. 604, records that the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was instituted by the Carmelites between 1876 and 1886 under the title, *Commemoratio B. Mariae Virg. duplex*. They assigned the feast to July 16, "because on that date in 1251, according to Carmelite traditions, the scapular was given by the Blessed Virgin to Saint Simon Stock. . . . In the seventeenth century the feast was adopted by several dioceses in the south of Italy. . . . The object of the feast is the special predilection of Mary for those who profess themselves her servants by wearing her scapular."

day. Men, women, and children throng the streets near the church carrying wax hearts, arms, legs, eyes, and candles (some of which are four or five feet in length). They buy these at stalls along the street curbs; the pink and red wax and the pictures on the candles add color and an air of festivity to what is otherwise a drab part of the great city. In fine weather, the statue is borne in procession, followed by a band and a crowd of worshipers and spectators. After mass, people gather at the stalls and purchase such food traditional to the occasion as salted beans, strings of nut-kernels, fried cakes, tomato pies, *torrone* (almond candy), seeds of various sorts, peppers, sausages, cheese, and long freshly baked loaves for sandwiches. Other stall owners cater to those dreading the Evil Eye and cry their amulets with: "*Roba di Napoli, per il mal'occhi*" ("Things from Naples against the Evil Eye"). They never fail to find profitable customers. At one such stall, far the most popular article was a parchment entitled *L'unica vera Lettera di Gesu Cristo* (The Only True Letter of Jesus Christ). This is so named because it is said to be a "copy of a letter of prayer found in the Holy Sepulchre of Our Lord Jesus Christ and preserved in a silver casket by the Most Holy and Christian Emperors and Empresses." The letter claims to carry with it miraculous powers, available to the purchaser of a copy.

Posters well advertise the celebration of the Feast of San Gandolfo as it approaches. The Sicilian shopkeepers in the heart of the section of New York adjacent to Elizabeth Street display the notices in their store windows. The following is a translation of one:

*Annual Festival in Honor of S. Gandolfo  
Protector of Polizzi Generosa*

PROGRAM OF THE FEAST

On Saturday the 14th of September, at ten a.m., the feast will begin with a performance of the famous musical band, led by the renowned Maestro Domenico A——. In the evening there will be a magnificent display of lights from Prince to Bleeker Streets and from Mott

# L'UNICA VERA LETTERA DI GESU' CRISTO

## Santa Lettera di GESU' CRISTO

Delle gocce di sangue  
mentre andava



Copia di una lettera di orazioni  
Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo in  
una cassa di argento da Sua  
Imperatrice Cristiana Desiderata  
gheria, S. Matilde e S. Brigida,  
sione di Gesù Cristo, facendo per  
loro apparire.

**GESU'**

FAVELLANDO CON ESSE



Desiderando S. Elisabetta, Regina d'Ungheria, S. Matilde e S. Brigida sapere alcune cose della passione di N. S. G. C. fecero particolari orazioni meriti le quali in segreto apparve G. C. e favellando con esse così loro disse:

Sappiate che i soldati armati furono 120, quelli che mi condussero legato furono 33, gli esecutori di ginastica 83, i pugni che ricevetti nella testa furono 150 e nel petto 108, i calci nelle spalle 80; fui trascinato, con corde e per i capelli 22 volte, botte e spinti nella faccia furono 180, battiture nel corpo 6666, battiture nel capo 110, si diedero un urtone mortale nel cuore fui alzato in aria per i capelli ad ore 24; ad un tempo mandai 120 sospiri, fui trascinato e tirato per la barba 28 bolte; plague nella testa 20, spine di giunchi marini 72, puntate di spine nella testa 110, spine mortali nella fronte 3, dopo flagellato, vestito da re di burla, piaghe nel corpo 1000. I soldati che mi condussero al calvario furono 603, quelli che mi guardavano furono 3; gocce di sangue che sparì 2640. Chi recita ogni giorno 3 Pater Ave e Gloria per lo spazio di anni 15, per compiere il numero delle gocce di sangue che ho sparso, mi concedo 5 gradi e sono: la prima, indulgenza plenaria e rimissione di tutti i suoi peccati, la seconda sarà liberato dalle penie del Purgatorio, la terza se morirà prima di compire i detti 15 anni, sarà per esso come se fossero compiti, la quarta, sarà come se fosse morto ed avesse sparso tutto il suo sangue per la S. Fede; la quinta è che verrà io dal Cielo per l'anima sua e per l'anima dei suoi parenti sino alla quarta generazione.

Un certo Capitano Spagnuolo viaggiando, vide per terra vicino Barcellona una testa rotta dal busto, che gli parò così: Giacché vi portate a Barcellona, o passeggiere condannati un confessore accio possa confessarmi, essendo già tre giorni che sono stato uscito dai ladri e non posso morire se prima non mi confessino. Condotto al luogo il confessore, dal capitano suddetto la testa vibrante si confessò ed iudi spiro, trovandosi addosso al busto da cui era stata recisa, la suddetta orazione, la quale in quella occasione fu approvata da vari tribunali della Santa Inquisizione della Regnante di



che sparse N. S. G. I.  
al Calvario.



ritrovata nel Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme e conservato i Santi e dagli Imperatori da S. Elisabetta, Regina di Ungheria, per sapere alcune cose della passione di Gesù Cristo merite le qua-

**CRISTO**

E COSÌ, LORO DICENDO



Spagna. I suddetti Pater Ave e Gloria si potranno recitare ogni giorno per qualunque anima. Altra simile copia della suddetta lettera è stata miracolosamente ritrovata nel luoghi chiamato Pursit, tre leghe lontano da Marsiglia, scritta a lettere d'oro e per opera divina portata da un fascio di anni e del medesimo luogo di Pursit.

Con una giunta e dichiarazione il 2 gennaio 1750 che dice che tutti quelli che travagliano nei giorni di Domeniche saranno maledetti da me, perché nelle Domeniche dovete andare alla Chiesa a pregare. Idem che vi perdono i vostri peccati, e per questo vi ho dato 6 giorni per travagliare e il settimo per riposo, e far opere di devozione, e delle vostre genti saranno ricolme di benedizioni e grazie; per lo contrario non credete alle presenti veritarie maggiori castigazioni ed ai vostri figli e vi mandero peste, fame, guerra, dolore nel cuore, toni e terremoti.

Quelli che giudicheranno che questa lettera non sia scritta per opera divina, e detta dalla sacraistisca bocca di Dio e quelli che la terranno maliziosamente nascosta senza pur biclarla ad altre persone, saranno maledetti da Dio, e confusi nel giudizio e chi invece la pubblicherà se avesse tanti peccati, purché se veramente è pentito di avermi offeso e ancora avendo fatto qualche ingiuria al suo prossimo, chiedendo mi perdonino, io gli cancello i suoi peccati, quelli che capitano quasi divozione, e quelli che la guarderanno e leggeranno e la faranno leggere e la faranno sentire dentro le loro giornate periferano.

Quello che porterà questa Orazione non morrà annegato né di male sorte, né di morte improvvisa, sarà liberato da congiuro e dalla peste, dalla sete e non morirà senza conoscenza, sarà liberato dai miei nemici, e dal potere della giustizia e da tutti i miei malevoli e dai falsi testimoni; le donne che non possono partorire, tenendola addosso, partoriranno subito e sciaceranno di pericolo. Nelle case ove sarà questa Orazione non vi saranno tradimenti né di cose cattive, e i giorni prima della sua morte quella che l'avrà sonata di sé vivrà la Beata Vergine Maria come dice Sua Gregorio Papa

Benedetta da S. S. Papa Leone XIII in Roma, 5 Aprile 1890.



Street through Prince Street as far as the Bowery. A concert will take place on a special stand. EXTRA! Grand concert with singing by the following artists: . . . On Sunday the 15th there will be High Mass in the Church of Loreto in Elizabeth Street with a Eulogy. The evening program will be similar to that of the preceding day. On Monday the 16th a band will parade through the streets, playing. In the evening at 7:30 the grand procession will take place in which compatriots and the faithful will join. On the return of the procession there will be a flight of angels, fire works, and drawing of prizes; followed by the band concert with singing as on Saturday.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Committee hopes that all the compatriots and fellow-countrymen will attend in large numbers to honor our Holy Protector and to receive his blessings and protection in return.

The "flight of angels," the most outstanding feature of this celebration in New York as in Polizzi Generosa, is achieved by stretching ropes across the street from one fire escape to another and then lowering on pulleys two young girls dressed as angels until they are suspended over the saint's statue as it passes. The procession halts, and the "angels" recite verses in honor of the patron. Although this act lasts but ten minutes, the children must be under considerable physical strain; the twenty-five dollars each receives does not, therefore, seem excessive.

As in Italy, contributions are collected to cover the expenses of these celebrations, but in the United States this becomes the sole source of income. The municipality takes no share in the matter. The standards of the affairs have thus of necessity suffered, for it is principally the poor who help such performances to survive. Like their ancestors, they must pay for the days of rejoicing with long periods of privation. The pies and cakes baked for these occasions cost from sixty-five cents to three and four dollars. These pastries, almost sacramental in significance, appear in the homes of quite poor Italian families, even of those "on relief," and the family not infrequently spends anxious hours adjusting its "budget" so

that it will bear scrutiny by the relief investigator at his next call. A large *pizz'a grano* (wheat pie)<sup>17</sup> makes this quite a feat.

Although feasts appear to have relatively greater survival value than other religious practices, the burning of candles has by no means disappeared. Many Italians still burn them before images of saints both in their homes and in church, but the economic check has functioned more noticeably in this field than in that of gala celebrations. During the early months of the depression following 1929, a woman stated the issue thus: "Bread is bread, and candles are candles. When you have eaten, your stomach is full; when the candle is burned, you are still empty." The price of a candle is that of a small loaf of bread, but grocers sense something of the disciplinary force of the economic sacrifice involved in candle burning, for they frequently extend credit for candles to old first-generation customers and demand cash for loaves of bread purchased by their children.

In the ordinary run of things, many old customs drop into disuse without much regret. When misfortune occurs shortly after some minor violation of the code, however, the sinner will pause and reflect. He suddenly realizes that his opinions have changed and wonders if after all he has not lost more than he has gained. Coincidence thus, as so frequently, comes to the aid of religion.

Even with these adjustments forced by a changed environment, many South Italians in this country still hold firmly to belief in the Evil Eye. Here is a realm in which the test of experience by simple people is more remote. Even among second-generation immigrants, no one fails to know something of this superstition and to place at least partial credence in it. Even the more urbane North Italian knows something of it, but in general his conscious observance of it is more lim-

17. Wheat, as in Egyptian culture, is a symbol of the resurrection. Italians not only use it for pies at Christmas and Easter and on special feast days but also grow wheat plants in boxes in dark cellars to bring to church on Good Friday and lay before the altar.



*Italians Marching in the Procession Celebrating the  
Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.*



ited. One can scarcely overrate the significance for those dealing with South Italians in this country, therefore, of the manner in which these people conceive of and cope with this malevolent force. Its place is as assured for them in their mental set as is the annoyance occasioned an American by a "dirty look," previously mentioned in this chapter. Foreigners may ask how so little is known regarding a conception that plays so prominent a part in Italian life. The answer is simple. Since one can never be sure of the presence or absence of the Evil Eye in any assembly of people, those who believe in it customarily never mention the subject and protect themselves against it by secret measures. They leave in sight, however, such generally accepted objects as horns over doorways and in shops, amulets worn around the neck, palm leaves, and holy water. The common phrase, "*Dio benedica*," cannot be omitted at proper turns in conversation without arousing suspicion in the minds of those present. Care must be taken, too, in speaking of loved ones. "God forgive me," sighed a young mother, who could not refrain from joining in the nurse's praise of her handsome son at a clinic. "I should not have said that." She then made a horn sign secretly against her dress.

The following additional instances of the rôle of the Evil Eye in this country will broaden our conception of its function:

A young man who knew the Evil Eye connotation of shaggy eyebrows meeting across the bridge of the nose made a point of shaving that spot lest he be thought to have the terrible gift. A discussion of the matter with friends who, like him, professed disbelief in the superstition had convinced him that he had better shave "to be on the safe side."

Mrs. Raglani had a handsome little son. His appearance attracted so much attention that she made him wear a black veil when at play. One day, when he returned to the house, his veil caught fire from the flame of a holy candle on a table. Before his mother could come to his aid, he was badly burned. He carried the scar into manhood.

Mr. Vospi, when young, achieved fame in his neighborhood as a successful dice player. Shortly after winning heavily at one time from some boys whose grandmother was reputed to have the Evil Eye, he was returning home when a companion called out, "Quick, cross your legs. Old Mrs. Mara is bewitching you." Since a cross of any kind functions as a specific against the Evil Eye, he crossed his legs at once. Looking in the direction of the old lady's home, he then saw her on the porch gazing intently at him. "She looked just like an old witch," he said, "and I made a face at her."

A group of women meeting at a friend's house to pass the afternoon noticed with misgiving that a childless woman, said to have the Evil Eye, was present. In America, as in Italy, it is considered dangerous to antagonize such a person. She is allowed to visit in the homes of her neighborhood almost as freely as anyone and is treated like other guests. A young mother who had brought her six-months-old baby was especially uneasy and planned to leave as soon as she could without attracting attention. Everyone said something complimentary about the child, carefully adding "God bless it" afterwards. The childless woman did not say this, and the omission had such a depressing effect on the little party that in a short time they all went home. A few weeks later the baby died, and its death was attributed to the woman with the Evil Eye. Her malevolent influence had turned the child's blood to water. When the baby first began to ail, a doctor had been called in and had said that its diet needed changing, but the mother and her friends knew better. After what had happened, no diet would help. She followed the physician's advice only half-heartedly and depended more upon the counsel and practices of every *maga* she could find. Lemons were stuck full of pins, and the heads cut off; strings were knotted; sacred cakes were baked and placed at the feet of the patron saint. All to no end. It was too late.

An unexplained headache on returning home from a walk or errand is always due to the "eyes," and their presence must at once be ascertained by the oil and water test. Many people who perform this experiment have no more pretensions to magical power than would a mother examining her child's hand for a thorn think herself a surgeon. Such tests usually begin with the words, "*In namo del Padre del Figlio e del*

*Spirito Santo*" ("In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"). A basin of water is placed on a table, and a tablespoon of olive oil is held over it by the charm worker. Using her thumb, she allows the oil to fall drop by drop into the water. If the oil remains in a mass, the Evil Eye has been at work, and a charm must be pronounced over the basin to dispel its power. In repeating the charm, the floating oil is cut with a knife or a pair of scissors. While simply the words, "*In namo del Padre del Figlio e del Spirito Santo*," may be used again, other and sometimes possibly more ancient formulas are frequently applied. Italians only reluctantly reveal these and usually mumble them even when reciting them as charms so that the listener may not recognize the words. Whoever passes magical secrets on to others, as was noted in the first part of this chapter, except on Easter and Christmas Eve, destroys their power. The following represent examples of those used in this as well as certain other connections:

*Of Christian origin:*

Santa Rosalia, l'acqua veniva.	Saint Rosalie, The water came flowing.
C'era una donna, mal'occhio teneva.	There was a woman, Who had the evil eye.
Passò nostro Signore con palma d'oliva in mano.	Our Lord passed by With an olive palm in his hand.
L'acqua fece seccare, L'erba fece malagnare, a quattro cantoni spumicava.	He made the water dry up, The grass he made to wither, Cast it to the four corners (of the earth).
Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo.	Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*Calabrian charm, from Reggio di Calabria.*

Corpus Domine e Passione di Cristo	May the Body and Passion of Our Lord
libera nos dal'occhio tristo.	Save us from the Evil Eye.
<i>Neapolitan charm, from Acerra.</i>	

Occhio morto, occhio tristo  
ti seguito coll'acqua, olio  
e Gesù Cristo.

Eye of death, Evil Eye,  
I am following you with water,  
Oil and Jesus Christ.

*Neapolitan charm, from Amalfi.*

*Of possibly older and at least of non-Christian origin:*

Ciglia cigliamo,  
coltello tagliamo,  
menamelo a mare.

We pare the eyelash,  
We cut it with a knife,  
Take it to the sea.

*Neapolitan charm, from Pompeii.*

Ciglia di fronte  
male che affronta.

Eyelash of the face  
Evil which insults.

*Neapolitan charm, from Amalfi.*

*Of both pagan and Christian origin:*

Cristo, Cristiello !  
Tu sei buono  
Ma è più buono quello

Christ, little Christ !  
Thou art good  
But how much better is he  
[i.e., Satan].

*Calabrian charm.*

Among physical substances, salt remains in this country as in Italy one of the most common charms. Its prestige is heightened through its use in both religious and superstitious ceremonials. The priest puts it in the mouth of the infant at baptism with the words, "*Salis sapientis*" ("Salt of Wisdom"). He sprinkles it in the holy water on Good Friday. Further instances of the use of salt, the first of which recalls references to it in the first part of this chapter, follow:

An Italian mother asked the priest to put salt on the head of her wayward child because she thought he had been bewitched or was a changeling.

A man asked to have his weekly relief grant of cash changed to a grocery order. His wife was spending half of the amount on salt

with which to strew their apartment. She believed her son, who had chorea, had been bewitched. An investigator found the entrance hall, doorway, and all window sills littered with salt.

Among the younger second- and third-generation immigrants, the influence of education upon beliefs in black magic frequently meets the same sort of check that it does in the case of religion. One striking coincidence that can be interpreted as retribution for departure from the traditional mores plays a more significant part in individual behavior than numerous examples of the safe flaunting of old customs. The following case, fairly typical of many, presumably involves the activities of a *maga* in the pay of an enemy and of another *maga* hired to dispel the charms of the first:

The parents of his intended wife strenuously opposed the intentions of Mr. Orlando and their daughter to be married. Since he came from a different part of Italy than they, they believed a successful union unlikely. When their daughter refused to listen to any persuasion, the parents finally acquiesced and as a last resort presented the couple with some amulets to protect them against the hazards of their experiment, especially against the Evil Eye.

Mr. Orlando, long since converted from such primitive superstitions, threw his amulets from the window as soon as he was on the train and persuaded his wife to do the same. "We would be the laughing stock of my friends if they found out," he argued.

Upon their arrival at their new home in another city, friends and relatives gave the bride and groom a pretentious party. Among the guests was a pretty young cousin to whom Mr. Orlando devoted unusual attention.

As the newlyweds prepared for bed, Mrs. Orlando noticed that the attitude of her husband toward her had changed. He went to sleep without so much as kissing her. This behavior continued for several weeks, and Mrs. Orlando became desperate. Fearing that she had offended him, she wrote to her mother for help. The mother, once she had the alleged facts of the case before her, expressed no surprise and announced that a spell *must* have been cast over the bridegroom. The discovery of a crumpled knot of ribbons in his

wedding clothes laid bare the means of enchantment. When the wife then told her mother of the pretty cousin, they both readily agreed that someone's—probably the cousin's—envy lay at the base of the affair.

The mother took the ribbons, returned home, and thanked the saints that witches might still be found in this unbelieving land. After several oil and water tests had been performed a witch revealed that someone—probably the former sweetheart—had slipped the ribbon charm unseen into Mr. Orlando's pocket. This had tied up his heart and withheld his affection from his wife. The charms used to dissolve this spell included the sprinkling of salt over the ribbons and their ceremonial cutting with scissors and burning.

The incident speedily came to a charmingly naïve denouement. Mrs. Orlando told her husband what had been done, and both of them bought new amulets that they wore constantly. She was thus able to write to her mother within a very few days that the groom was completely restored to his former self. When their first child was born, fetishistic symbols were at once fastened to its clothing. No more ardent exponents of magic could be found in their neighborhood than Mr. and Mrs. Orlando. In closing this account, however, one does well to note the easy rationalization of an embarrassing situation provided for both Mr. and Mrs. Orlando.

The popular idea persists that superstition can swiftly be eradicated by a joint program of Americanization and education. Swift changes, however, are not likely. Such deep-seated customs, if swept aside at all, are dissipated gradually. The older generation, on the other hand, is not impervious to more rational interpretations of situations traditionally explained by reference to magic. Few become more ardent advocates of the services of the physician as opposed to those of a *maga* than those to whom modern medicine has made miraculous gifts. Since such cases are still relatively limited, however, the old ideas and practices in the main fill the greater part of their needs more satisfactorily than they think modern ways would. Medical science, too, is not infallible, particularly in the comparatively unexplored field of mental disease. In a given case, modern scientific therapy may turn out

favorably, and again it may not. While the same can be said to a far greater degree for charms and potions, the failures of magic are more easily and convincingly rationalized.

Practical dangers as well as fancied ones, the ever-present element of chance in life and particularly of bad luck, make people cling to the apparently tried and true ways of coping with the Great Unknown. The beliefs and adjustments described here remain, therefore, almost as much a normal part of the daily lives of many Italians in this country as in the old. When those mental attitudes and habits cease to have their apparent utility in the new environment, then and only then are they likely to disappear.<sup>18</sup>

18. For a comprehensive treatise on the rôle of religion in the adjustment of culture, see W. G. Sumner and A. G. Keller, *The Science of Society*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1927, Vol. II. A brief discussion appears in A. G. Keller's *Man's Rough Road*, New York, Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1932, chaps. XI-XIX.

## CHAPTER X

### HEALTH AND HOSPITALS

OUR South Italian immigrants had two means of coping with illnesses in their native land. Ancient tradition furnished them with a mass of folklore relating to organic and mental disorders and their cure. In particularly trying cases, they could be doubly sure by calling in one of the local specialists in such beliefs and practices—a witch, a barber, a midwife, or an herbalist. From modern science they had gleaned but few notions, and those in a vague form. They looked with considerable question upon that upstart, the book-trained physician.

Small towns usually had one physician, paid by the state or by the commune in which he practiced. He earned a fixed salary and in some places free use of a house through treating the poverty-stricken and those not so poor, and supplemented these returns with what fees he could charge private patients. These practitioners did not, however, stand always in good repute. Their services were valued in true South Italian style on the basis of the idea that "when it don't cost anything you might know it is no good." The following notes on a cholera epidemic, written by an eyewitness,<sup>1</sup> illustrate the status frequently held by these professional functionaries of a state or commune:

They resist and resent every effort to purify and ventilate their houses, and the most natural and simple precautions are neglected. As for the physicians, provided for them at the public expense, they look upon them with horror, and it is dangerous for them even to walk the streets. About a week since Dr. C—, on his way to visit a patient, excited a veritable tumult. "Give it to him! give it to him," was cried out from the infuriated crowd. "He is one of the doctors paid by the municipality to poison the poor people," and had not

1. Harriette Matteini, *Letters from Florence, Italy, in 1866*, New Haven, Fanny Winchester Hotchkiss, 1898, pp. 52-53.

the carabineers interfered for his protection, he would have been torn in pieces.

In addition to these local practitioners of questionable popular repute, modern scientific advice and health treatment were also available on a more extensive scale in such large cities as Palermo and Naples. The peasant—isolated from the blessings of civilization and content with his primitive answers to health problems—had little opportunity to test the validity of such notions.

Folk medicine had one great advantage among others in the eyes of the peasantry: it cost little or nothing. The peasant could make diagnoses and prescribe the pills and potions he compounded from the abundant materials available in the fields and woods. Since the herbalist competed with every good housewife, he was in demand only to meet the most unusual emergencies, to supply pills and potions of mysterious content. The barber's rôle as a bloodletter was firmly established. In competition with the legitimate physicians, some of the old magicians and witches tended to take on airs, to develop into what is commonly called in this country a quack or charlatan. References in the following discussion develop our conception of the work of these specialists.

The traditions of folk medicine shed significant light upon the processes of cultural evolution and upon the functioning of the human mind. Despite their variance from the findings of scientists, their efficacy makes their persistent survival no great source of wonder. The following excerpts from a defense of the primitive healer<sup>2</sup> places the whole matter in a sympathetic, a more accurate, perspective:

Scientific medicine is oriented to deal with biologically induced or "organic" ailments. It leaves socially or mentally induced or "functional" complaints largely to others—to psychiatrists, to faith healers, to quacks. The orientation of primitive medicine was ex-

2. "Give the Medicine Man His Due," *Bulletin of the Associates in the Science of Society*, New Haven, March, 1937, Vol. VI, No. 8, pp. 6-8, pp. 7-8 quoted.

actly the reverse. Few of the shaman's patients suffered from organic disease; the vast majority came to him with some social or psychological problem to solve. Although phrased, to be sure, in terms of witchcraft or some similar theory of supernatural causation, these problems were ordinarily soluble by a person possessing insight and an intimate knowledge of personalities and personal relationships in a small community. Even with us, the general practitioner in a small town often succeeds, through personal familiarity with his patients and with the community situation, where a better trained but impersonal city specialist fails. The shaman has all the advantages of the "family doctor." Like the latter, he is more than a physician; he is a practical student of human relations. . . .

If medicine has a lesson to learn from anthropology, it is this: that scientific medicine will begin to approach the art of the shaman in effectiveness when it becomes not only a biological, but also a social and psychological, science.

Faith in their practices or in the magical power of the witches made up, in many cases, for the inadequacy of their procedures.

Folk diagnoses were typically based on superficial external characteristics, formed into folk sayings. One group of the more general of these bore resemblance to the saying that the "wicked look like devils, and the good like angels." These pat statements of relationships included the following: "The red-haired are hot-tempered and deceitful." "There were two faithful ones with red hair, Jesus Christ and the Calf of Sorrento." (The latter was the heifer that kept the Christ Child warm in the manger. A statue of it stands at Sorrento.) Hair on the body denoted strength, but too much hair gave one the characteristics of a savage. "The eye that does not see be-speaks the heart that does not feel." "Tall men have little enterprise." (The ethnocentrism of this latter statement is apparent.) "The face without color is false." "God save us from a hairy woman!" "He who has long ears will live long." "The fat woman is sterile." A hooked nose in a livid face was the most outstanding indication that a person had the Evil Eye. Thick lips indicated sensuality, and a large mouth,

greed. A person with a long neck was thought susceptible to tuberculosis. Small hands signified long life.

All knew these sayings. The ones that did not check with a type of experience that was immediate and real at least were of a type bolstered by striking coincidences, the sort of thing that substantiates beyond question so many other folk superstitions. Since they exerted a powerful influence in defining the "man as he should be," they are highly useful to social workers in more ways than merely in connection with folk medicine. They furnish a means for fathoming the otherwise inexplicable antipathies that issue forth in the remark, "I disliked him from the very first."

The maladies known to the amateur practitioners of folk medicine were somewhat limited in number. The respiratory diseases, especially tuberculosis, bronchitis, and pneumonia, while relatively rare, were among the most dreaded. The early stages of tuberculosis were seldom recognized, and an accurate diagnosis was thus possible only when the patient had reached the last stages, beyond all help. On this account, Sicilians call it the *male sottile* (insidious sickness). A well-known remedy consisted of a decoction of fleas taken from the bed of the sufferer—a device that suggests the modern theory of inoculation with one's own germs. Peasants popularly supposed that this malady was transmitted through the blood. The people so feared tuberculosis that one who suspected that he had it tried to dissimulate the characteristic signs. He would not use a receptacle for his sputum but would spit rather on the floor (usually earthen) in the usual manner of healthy persons. The hot dry air and bright sunshine of the southern climate prevented the disease from becoming more general.

Various maladies involving high fever, such as malaria, typhoid (commonly confused with typhus), and rheumatic fever, were of common occurrence. Their causes were not understood. This situation is characterized by the fact that they believed "the symptoms are the illness itself."<sup>8</sup> When symp-

8. Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 189.

toms appeared that they could recognize, they were ready to treat the disease itself, not to attempt to prevent its further development.

Contagious diseases of childhood were quite prevalent in Italy. As in many other countries, mothers looked upon them as inevitable and even desirable experiences for their children. They therefore exposed them to such sicknesses in order to produce "a mild attack." This was done in the case of measles, chicken pox, and scarlet fever. Smallpox was so general that the peasants thought no one could escape it. A Sicilian proverb states that "a girl cannot be termed beautiful until she has had smallpox"; that is, until one could determine whether or not it would destroy her beauty.<sup>4</sup> Of the non-infectious diseases, cholera infantum and other intestinal ailments were the most common. Though children were nursed for two or more years, they were also given the same food as adults after a few months—a diet predisposing them to this type of sickness.

Two cures were current for children that had chronic illness. One, known as measuring, consisted in taking the child—the nature of the cure necessitated that it be a young child—and bringing its right leg up to its left arm and its left leg up to its right arm. The other treatment was to dress the patient in a miniature copy of the black habit of Saint Anthony, the patron of children. One sent to America from Italy by a child's grandmother was of black homespun wool and had a small hood. It was a dress rather than a habit, but this may have been because the patient was a girl. The child wore it ritualistically for a part of each day for several weeks.

Sometimes a woman who had a chronic disease would go from door to door to ask for money. The humiliation of this begging, which may or may not have been necessary, had a sacrificial connotation. When she collected enough, she took the money to a priest to have a mass said for her recovery. If a patient was too ill for such a "begging pilgrimage," some member of her family did it for her.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

According to popular theories, many diseases—both external and internal—were caused by an excess of acid or salt in the system or by the accumulation of too much blood in one place: an inflammation. Another fundamental tenet in their philosophy of sickness was that every disease had to run a certain course; their lore definitely set the number of days for each illness. The people believed, therefore, that it was dangerous to give anything but very mild treatments lest the ailment be driven inward before the period had ended. Tradition, of course, furnished prescriptions for each disorder, and, when symptoms were so obvious that even the patient's family could recognize them, the matter was comparatively simple. When a diagnosis could not be made, however, various specifics were available for trial one after another. Provided that the patient did not die in the process—a confirmation, not a refutation, of popular theory—a remedy might finally be discovered. Following its administration, recovery always set in. When the remedy was successful, a suitable diagnosis might then be worked out. It never seemed to enter anyone's mind that death might be due to the conglomeration of treatments or that recovery took place in spite of them. Italians believed vaguely that the effects of all the wrong pills, potions, and charms were nullified by the application of the correct one. A physician, when called in, frequently had to content himself with competing with family experimentation.

The sources of cures in folk medicine were vegetable, animal, and mineral, ranking in number and alleged value in the order given. Among vegetables, the most common were olive oil, lemon juice, wine, vinegar, garlic, onion, lettuce, wild mallow, flour in the form of bread, rue, and tobacco, known as the *erba santa* (sacred plant). Sometimes the whole of an animal was utilized; sometimes only part. The principal creatures figuring in folk prescriptions were the wolf, chicken, viper, lizard, frog, pig, dog, mouse, and sea horse, all of course indigenous to Italy. The minerals valued included most commonly salt in the form of rock salt rather than sea salt, and such others as sulphur, a prized remedy

found in great abundance in the mines along the south coast of Sicily. Certain bodily secretions, principally saliva, urine, mother's milk, blood, and ear wax, were also commonly employed. Saliva was thought most efficacious when taken from the mouth early in the morning before any food had been eaten. This was called "fasting spittle." Mothers used it to bathe the eyes of children with conjunctivitis. "Fasting spittle" from the mouth of a seventh male child was alleged to be a cure for impetigo. To ward off the Evil Eye, one spit three times behind the back of a woman of ill repute who has just kissed a newly born infant or behind a hunchback or a priest with an ugly face. To ward off contagion when visiting the sick, one had to spit at the house door with great force. If a woman was in labor and the process did not advance rapidly enough, a neighbor had to spit out of the window of the room. All ritual spitting had the power to break any magic spell that might have brought sickness or ill fortune of any kind.

Baldness was treated with an application of warm cow's urine. Sulphur and lemon juice were mixed as an ointment for scabies. A live frog fastened to the temple near the afflicted organ was thought to cure certain eye diseases. A slice of garlic held near the eye to make it water also served somewhat the same purpose. Slices of lemon or potato were bounds on the wrists to reduce fever, a disorder that Italians looked upon as an illness unrelated to any other symptom. They thought that fever might be brought on by fright, a draught of air, disappointment, or sorrow—a theory that played some part in making Italian parents indulgent toward their young children. Sufferers from erysipelas wore a dried sea horse as an amulet. This disease was so dreaded that it was never mentioned by name. He who dared to mention it would promptly contract the ailment himself. People spoke of it merely as "the ugly beast." Like Saint Vitus' dance or chorea, erysipelas was believed to result from the entrance of an evil spirit into the body. It was cured by the repetition of magic formulas, one of the most typical of which is the following from Modica in Sicily:

Lisina (erysipelas)! Lisina! Going round the world,  
Dressed in red, walking in red.

Lisina, where are you going?

I am going to the sea, where I shall cast away the erysipelas of men.  
Go! Throw it in the thorns! Go! Throw it in the sea,  
So that it may melt away as salt melts in water.

The wearing of a red scarf was a cure for this disease as well as for measles. Black silk scarfs were often put around the necks of those suffering from sore throat, held to be a fore-warning of sickness. Neither the silk nor the warmth of the scarf was significant; the color served much the same function as the wearing of black for mourning, as an avoidance practice. There was no illness for which there was not required some oil, water, or a miraculously effective loaf of bread of peculiar design.

Bleeding, cupping, and scarifying were common therapeutic measures. Barbers carried out the first of these operations with a lancet or leeches. They also performed, with no other authority than that granted by traditional usage, such commonplace surgical operations as vaccination, cautery, the setting of fractures, the treatment of minor dislocations, and the opening of abscesses.

Tumors were spoken of as "closed melons," the true nature of which could not be ascertained. According to popular opinion, cancer was an animal that crept through the body and devoured the flesh on its way. Since they did not believe such internal growths could be cured, no interference with them should be attempted. This notion survives in this country in the strong opposition of old-fashioned Italians to hospital treatment for these disorders. External growths, on the other hand, were a different matter. They required varied but immediate attention.

Venereal diseases were called the "French sickness" or the "woman's sickness." Because of their nature, in Italy as in this country the advice of quacks and magicians was more frequently sought by victims than that of a legitimate physician. Contact with a virgin was held to be an unfailing cure

for gonorrhea. In Sicily, however, the problem that confronted sufferers was where to find a virgin who would have intercourse with a man outside of wedlock. The faithfulness of Sicilian women was proverbial, and their daughters were strictly supervised in all that they did. Dr. Giuseppe Pitre,<sup>5</sup> the Italian folklorist and physician, states that the only two instances of this treatment to come under his observation involved definitely feeble-minded girls.

Worms were a common complaint among children. This was probably due to the use of night soil as a fertilizer. Many cases were also diagnosed as worms that were actually some other type of stomach or intestinal disturbance. The following Sicilian charm was used as a specific against such ailments:

Saint Cosimo and Damiano,  
You are the sovereign doctors.  
Saint Elias was also a heavenly doctor.  
The worms in this circle [drawn about a child's stomach]  
Are all evil creatures.  
Kill them all.  
Keep them from his little heart.  
For Jesus' sake,  
Cast them out and let them come no more.<sup>6</sup>

Cosimo and Damiano were twin saints who were supposed to have been physicians and were therefore regarded as the patrons of medicine. Their aid was frequently invoked in troublesome illnesses. A cross made in ink on a child's abdomen was another valuable specific against worms.

Nervousness, hysteria, and mental diseases of all kinds were attributed to the entrance of an evil spirit into the body. It lived in the body until it was cast out by making its abiding place so unpleasant that it was constrained to leave. This prompted the physical abuse of the sufferers, shaking and beating them and making horrible faces at them. In earlier times, the treatment was even more drastic. Doctor Pitre,<sup>7</sup>

5. *Ibid.*, p. 468.

7. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

upon witnessing the driving out of spirits in this way in 1898 in the Church of San Filippo di Calatabianco, was divided between a violent desire to laugh at the facial contortions of the populace and a sense of horror at the cruelty of the whole proceeding. If he laughed, he knew full well that the people would stone him.

If girls past puberty exhibited nervousness, their relatives thought it due to their need for a husband; the cure was to find one as soon as possible. Since a certain amount of nervous instability was not unusual in adolescent girls, this method of dealing with it was one of the considerations that prompted early marriage among Italians.

The South Italians believed that the intellect was the gift of God. When a person became insane through its removal, God had taken back his gift as a punishment. Insanity, however, might also be due to such an influence as that of the Evil Eye. In such a case, a witch who had the particular knowledge necessary to cope with the situation was called in. Some of the charms she would use had an obviously Christian origin, as has this example:

In the name of the Father and of the Holy Trinity.  
Two eyes have harmed you,  
May three persons relieve you:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Away with envy and iniquity,  
May they scorch and burn in the flaming fire.  
Drive away all evil.  
In this house there are four evangelists:  
Luke, John, Mark, and Matthew.

It is significant that "Luke the Physician" was mentioned first; the usual order is, of course, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

With all these possibilities for cure within comparatively easy reach, it is not a matter for surprise that the South Italian did not accept the physician with any eagerness. The populace reasoned that when it was a question of seeking ad-

vice regarding their health they would be foolish to pay money only to learn something unpleasant. The sick and healthy alike thus surrounded themselves with all manner of devices and precautions with which to avert evil influences and unsalutary contacts. They drew, for instance, upon their almost endless stock of folk cures when friends and relatives fell ill. When death came despite all their cures and charms, they attributed it either to their failure to find the correct remedy or to the all-embracing will of God. For the latter, there was no alternative but patient and devout submission.

The South Italian feared greatly any exposure to draughts and chills. He thought these caused not only lung diseases but nervousness and even insanity. He was, nevertheless, even more fearful of the so-called *donne di fuora* (witches) who were always on the lookout for an open window to obtain entrance to a house, as the preceding chapter points out. Having entered, the mischief they could do knew no limits. They might leave the father and mother wracked with rheumatism when they awakened the next morning or the children scarred with some relic of their presence. Chapter IX describes the methods used for coping with these dangers.

An affliction traditionally confined to men was that known as *lupuminaru*. This changed them, under certain conditions, into a *lupo mannaro* (werewolf). After saying goodbye to his wife, a man might go out on Christmas Eve and be immediately transformed into such a wolf. When he met someone then on the street, he bit and even killed and sometimes ate him. The best defense against these persons so unwillingly made into horrible monsters was to carry a stick with a nail or pin in the end. When one stuck this stick into a werewolf and made the blood run, he was at once restored to his human form. And here is the "catch" that placed this fantasy upon a plane where it could not readily be tested: when discovered, the afflicted man always begged that his identity should not be revealed. A wife who knew her husband's condition always prepared a tub of cold water so that when he returned home he might duck his head in it and thus regain his former shape.

Although South Italians were afraid of hospitals, these have long been a part of the social life of their homeland. In fact, compared with these institutions, the well-trained physician was a much more recent addition. The general antipathy of Italians to hospitals was derived, therefore, from factors other than any that might be associated too closely with novelty. The first institutional care of the sick was provided in Italy by monks and nuns in monasteries. The sick who came under their care, however, were not those who had homes or relatives to look after them but were the wanderers, the homeless, the lepers—in short the dregs of mankind. Not infrequently, some of these patients were demented persons who might have homes and friends but had been turned out because of their supposed possession by evil spirit. The monks and nuns took them in out of sheer pity rather than because they were equipped in any way to cure them or to alleviate their sufferings except to the extent that kindness and shelter might help. Their openhandedness, of course, varied according to the extent to which some prince or noble had subsidized them or to which their establishment depended upon its own internal economy alone. Under such conditions, any sort of care was thought good enough for their patients.

Hospitals had their popular status lowered in numerous ways. The menials about such monasteries and convents were usually *orfanotrofi* (female orphans) from asylums who performed rough tasks in return for a scanty living and a small dowry. Without the latter, many of these unfortunate girls might never have been able to marry. During the past century in Sicily, too, in an effort to stamp out the profession of female mourners who forced their services contrary to law upon bereaved families, "the government sentenced persons detected in this practice to three months service in the hospital of the Cubba," in Palermo.<sup>8</sup> That many hospital attendants were thus once criminals did not add to the repute of the institutions.

The South Italians' attitude toward charity also helps to

8. *Ibid.*, Palermo, L. Pedone Lauriel di Carlo Clausen, 1889, Vol. XV, p. 288.

clarify the hospital situation. Nature had been grudging to them, and their labor often brought forth little or no result. They started out therefore with the philosophy that "what don't cost anything ain't no good," even though they bitterly realized that many things that did cost something were also frequently no good—unless one took into account the self-discipline afforded. Charity as dispensed by the rich and noble of the old times was given from a superfluity; it could not be doled out upon the basis of a sentiment that an Italian would think so foolhardy as he would this slogan of the Community Chest in this country: "Give Till It Hurts." Charity, as a result, had little value to poor Italians, for the gifts were apt to be intermittent, irregular in amount, and frequently unsuited to the needs of recipients. This connotation of charity carried over into the popular attitude toward hospitals. Rationalizing that physicians naturally want something in return for skilled attention, peasants believed that free care was given only so that the bodies of the patients might thus be used experimentally. This notion, as we shall see, has been carried over to America.

In Sicily, a hospital for the insane was called an *ospizio* or *ospedale*, and therefore "when a man went to the hospital it signified he was insane."<sup>9</sup> The word *ospizio* also meant a convent or asylum, in the sense of an institution for the poor and dependent. An old Neapolitan curse runs, "*Pozz' fini in dint ospedale*" ("May you end your days in the hospital"). This was held to be the worst fate that could befall a human being. News that a friend was going to the hospital elicited the cry, "*O Dio! Sant' Anton'! Sant' Anton'*! How dreadful!" This reaction had no connection with the degree or nature of the patient's ailment.

The beliefs regarding death furnished still other reasons for antipathy toward hospitals. The souls of those who died in hospitals did not pass on at once to Purgatory because those establishments were believed to interfere with the proper funeral rites. These ghosts haunted the buildings where lay the sick and dying and struck terror into their hearts. When

9. *Ibid.*, Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1896, Vol. XIX, p. 428.

a patient talked in delirium, people thought he was conversing with the ghosts of former patients. This notion also gathered impetus from the fashion in which these institutions were forced to dispose of bodies. When a dead person's home was some distance away, Italy's climate necessitated such speedy burial that all was over in many instances before relatives arrived. Peasants believed, too, that when—especially during epidemics—a hospital became too crowded, nurses merely administered a draught reputed to have been the favorite poison of Catherine de' Medici, prepared for the purpose by accommodating physicians and apothecaries. An English woman,<sup>10</sup> living near Lecce in Apulia, illustrated this belief in 1881 with the following incident:

During an epidemic of diphtheria . . . so many sufferers died, that one of our servants (a peasant) being attacked, we hoped to save her from a like fate by sending her to the hospital in the town. She was there delivered over to the care of the good nuns, who presided as hospital nurses; but such was her horror of the dreaded hospital, that she effected her escape, and, to our dismay, we beheld her returning on foot from the place—eight miles off—to which she had been conveyed, in an apparently dying condition, that very morning.

Great stigma thus attached to hospitals in the South Italian peasant's mind not only because they were charity institutions and accepted all sorts of inmates, but still more because of the superstitions he connected with them. When as a last resort a patient was coerced into entering a hospital, he was generally near death, and the strain of the long journey to the nearest institution plus his superstitious dread of the place often hastened his inevitable end. "You only go to the hospital," they asserted, "to die."

The *ospedali* (hospitals) of Italy included then several different types of institutions that served varied purposes and sprang from disparate sources. They included the free hospitals for the poor that compared in reputation to the sick wards of town poorhouses in New England, though in many

10. "Country Life in Italy," *Cornhill Magazine*, 1881, p. 615.

places their condition was far superior. Three of the largest *ospedali* in Naples were the *Gesù e Maria*, the *Ospedale della Pace*, and the *Dei Pellegrini*. Another, the *Incurabili* (for incurables) was affiliated with the University of Naples. The hospitals for the insane, such as the *Ospedale Santa Maria della Pietà per le Malattie mentale* in the province of Rome, bore the same generic label. The establishment for the care of the aged poor, however, was called the *Ospizio per i Vecchi* (Hospice for the Old) or *Ricoveri*, a more modern term. When the inmates of this institution became ill, they had to be sent to the free hospitals. These institutions had two great advantages from the Italian standpoint, not found in the corresponding organizations in this country: hospital visiting was not restricted to certain hours of the day, and food might be brought to the patients.

Those who could pay their rates had the privilege of suffering in institutions that were not called *ospedali*. These were the *cliniche private* (private clinics) and *case di salute* (sanatoria). The dispensaries for outpatients were free and called *cliniche*, but no one who could pay would attend them or, for that matter, be permitted treatment in them. When a person who could afford medical treatment was well enough to walk, he went to his physician's office; if not, the physician called at his home, as in America. Private clinics were named for the head surgeon in attendance who also acted as director. The nurses were highly trained women who had to have attended both high school and college. Such training might or might not be required of the nuns who nursed in the *ospedali*, many of whom were French and belonged to the Order of Saint Vincent.

Generally speaking, then, clinics for inpatients were paid institutions; for outpatients, free dispensaries; and hospitals were always free and for the very poor only.

#### *IN AMERICA*

THE attitude of the first-generation immigrant toward medical care is much the same as it was in Italy. He came to this country well equipped, as he thinks, with the best of medical

knowledge and of ideas on the preservation of his family's health. When his ideas are ridiculed, he examines the substitute offered, finds it far beyond his grasp, and rejects it as unsuited to his needs. The first concessions he makes are in part due to his inability to procure materials, such as wolf bones, from which to compound accustomed remedies. He can, however, wander into American fields and woods and return with a burden that includes a bewildering array of mushrooms and other foods as well as of plants, berries, and barks for his medicine cupboard. Wild fennel, deadly nightshade, wild mallow, mullein, dock, and sorrel are all grist to his mill. Plants that do not grow wild, like basil and rue, are cultivated either in his garden or in little wooden boxes and pots that he sets on his porch or fire escape. Such herbs, dried and mixed with powdered palm leaves or salt, are worn as amulets or, soaked in that powerful repellent of evil, olive oil, are used to massage dislocations and rheumatism, and for worms in children.

One learns about these things quite simply through exhibiting a sympathetic interest in what immigrants are raising or have hanging up to dry. One can thus gain an insight into an aspect of their lives that is little known but quite valuable to social workers, physicians, visiting nurses, etc. How else can one learn of the faith of Italian immigrants in a wild-mallow brew and in chicken soup for treating intestinal disturbances? They value the latter as a cathartic rather than as an easy source of nourishment for the ill. How else can one prepare oneself to cope with the disturbing belief of these immigrants that fever sufferers should be given hot rather than cooling drinks? This question involves, of course, a type of magic—the homeopathic—that has also prompted them to treat spider and snake bites by feeding a part of the creature itself to its victim.

Strangely enough, people who in Italy went so readily to a barber for bloodletting, strenuously object in this country to blood tests. The idea that blood drawn off by a barber is supposed to be unhealthy figures in this paradox. When tests are made in American clinics, on the other hand, the needle

is inserted in a healthy arm. The Italian has the conception of the connection between soul and blood found in Leviticus: "for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof." An epileptic declared that he had never had a convulsion until he gave some blood to a friend for a transfusion. This gave an evil spirit its chance to get into him. Italian children, like their parents, are very much afraid of spilling their blood and cry out loudly when pricked with a pin. Mothers often hesitate to have their children's blood tested because they know their offspring will be so terrified at the experience as to become ill. A mother who wished to coöperate with the school nurse suggested that each child have a sample of its blood drawn behind a screen; thus the other children would not see the blood. Another reason that enters into this antipathy is touched on in the first part of this chapter. Italians do not see the sense in meeting something unpleasant halfway through taking blood tests for diphtheria, syphilis, and tuberculosis. They argue that, since diseases largely run their own course anyway, it is better to leave all investigation into health questions until a condition becomes so obvious that it cannot be neglected. They use traditional precautions and hope for the best until action is practically forced upon them. The notion fits in well with their fatalistic ideas. "*Pazienza!*" they caution, "one should not expect too much of life!"

Dentists meet this obstacle, modified to relate to the teeth. Italians believe that it is useless to give dental care to first teeth, and, so far as second teeth are concerned, they are more likely to impute caries to "poor American air" than to incorrect diet. At any rate, when a tooth has reached a stage of decay where it demands treatment, it is soon enough to consider doing something about it. When a child lost his incisors in Italy, peasants blamed it on eating too much cheese!

Italians still keep sicknesses secret as long as they can. This applies especially to afflicted daughters. They are ashamed to let neighbors know of an incident that may impair the social status of a member of their family. A reputation for poor health affects unfavorably the value of girls as potential wives. This notion applies only mildly to boys.

After all, boys need not worry about their "marketability." Anything that might impair the fertility of girls, however, may make even a satisfactory dowry useless.

The old ideas regarding pregnancy have undergone slight but significant variations in this country. The notion that a mother does not conceive while nursing continues to be held, as is a theory that bolsters this one: that a woman who does not conceive at regular periods during her child-bearing years will develop tumors. This prevents prolonged nursing from restricting reproduction and minimizes its own chances of being exploded as an inaccurate generalization. An American obstetrician suggests that the tumor theory may well be due to the fact that conditions militating against conception are unhealthy and not infrequently of a malignant nature. "It is funny," one hears young mothers lamenting, "how the old-fashioned women with large families seldom suffer from the ailments that we present-day women do." In further support of the tumor theory's application, a doctrine teaches that continence produces uterine disease, and gives rise to the conclusion that contraceptive practices bring on various unhealthy conditions, especially nervousness. This theory is related to the idea that the best cure for nervousness among adolescent girls is marriage. The prevalence of birth-control notions in this country and the social pressures that force them upon immigrants, whether they will or no, have given these theories considerable significance.

The posterity policy of these immigrants continues to affect the men, as well, in a way noteworthy in this connection. They believe that continence produces tuberculosis in them. The following incident illustrates the sort of problem presented by this belief:

An Italian woman whose condition obliged her to observe absolute continence for a set period in order to regain her health, was finally prevailed upon to tell her husband of her need. After hearing the physician's report, he promised to do his best. After a few weeks, however, he arrived at a tuberculosis clinic with a specimen of sputum for examination. Fortunately, there was an enlightened person

in authority at the clinic who took the man's belief at face value and promised further examinations so long as the man continued to bring in specimens. Each examination, being negative, greatly relieved the Italian.

A physician's success in persuading children of Italian parentage to take medicine depends to a large extent on the trust the mother has in him. Since an Italian physician generally understands something of her cultural inhibitions, she is more tractable in his hands than in an American's. Physicians of other cultural backgrounds, however, may succeed as well by sensing the nature of her defenses and using sympathy and patience to win her over. They must realize in particular that Italians believe that children—like animals—know instinctively what is good for them. When a child is forced to take medicine or food that is strange or even disagreeable, he is injured by it. This does not mean that all the old remedies of folk medicine were pleasant to take, but the mothers were so persuaded of their beneficial qualities that they were able to convince their children.

Italians have even less faith in those American specialists in ills of the psyche, the psychiatrists, than they have in our medical practitioners. Most first-generation immigrants place the psychiatrist on a level with their own *witch doctors*, the *maghi*. Some are afraid of him, and a few merely think it a waste of time to go and answer what they term a "lot of silly questions." The following instance may be regarded as typical of the former group:

A woman consented to a psychiatric interview, even though she had no faith in the physician. She did so purely because she was fond of the visiting nurse and wished to please her. She arrived at the clinic with a large handbag clutched in her arms with which she was greatly preoccupied. Nothing could persuade her to part with it. "I tell you after," she confided mysteriously and went into the psychiatrist's office. When she came out, she opened the bag and exhibited a quantity of amulets against the Evil Eye. She had added all she could borrow from her neighbors to those possessed by her family. "The doctor," she triumphantly asserted, "he no hurt me."

Psychiatrists informed in the vagaries of Italian folklore can aid greatly in coping with problems that arise in this and other connections. Social workers, for example, soon discover that many Italians believe a "problem case" in a family brings more consideration and frequently more relief than might otherwise be expected. As an experienced woman frankly put it, "If you pretend you're nervous, you get more help."

The continuance of belief in the malevolence of witches in this country even unto the second and third generations, as the preceding chapter brings out, makes this a highly significant factor to be dealt with in medical and psychiatric treatments. Witches figure chiefly in explanations of ill-health among children. The following instance, told by the mother of a five-year-old girl who had had infantile paralysis followed by other illnesses, is instructive:

The mother took her daughter to a *maga* (witch) and told what had happened. The child hid her face, and the *maga* pointed out, "I look like a devil to her, and she is frightened of me." This *maga*, said the informant, had lost two children and had sold her soul to the devil in return for the power to cure other people's children. The *maga's* purpose for doing this seemed rather vague, but the mother explained it as being due to her discontent with human limitations, a reason that is often advanced by Italians. "She talks with devils, but I think God will forgive her and give her back her soul for the good she does to others," the mother insisted.

She told the *maga* that her little girl had been in the habit of sleeping between her parents. Apparently the witches or, as the Neapolitans call them, the *iannare* had come in through the window and cast a spell on the child. "They would have harmed me and my husband, too," the mother sagely noted, "but they could not, because one of my ancestors once caught one of them and would not let her go until she promised not to harm my family for seven generations. I am the seventh. When we woke in the morning, my husband and I, we were black with bruises where the *iannare* had pinched us."

The *maga* rubbed the little girl with some salve, "mumbled something," and told the mother that at the crisis her child would have a

sort of fit or spell. This all happened. The next night the child had a fit, and there was a frightful noise outside the window to which the mother listened in terror. Her husband slept through it all. The little girl was also under treatment by an Italian physician at the time who merely laughed at the witch's efforts, but the child recovered, and her parents gave the entire credit to the *maga*. They had only gone to the physician because the nurses at the hospital where the child had been treated at the time of the paralysis insisted upon it.

Americans who do not know the history of Italian hospitals can never fully appreciate the deep mistrust that these immigrants feel toward the corresponding institutions in this country. The red tape connected with admission and discharge adds to their bewilderment and makes the separation from the solicitude of relatives even more painful. The culmination of the admission process in the removal of their clothes not seldom fills them with despair. The diet then increases their discomfiture. When ill, they believe that the eating of some particularly attractive food—regardless of its ingredients—aids the cure. Even the attempts of well-meaning hospital dietitians fall short of their expectations. An actual South Italian dish would be too strong smelling for the modern hospital ward. A woman who had been in a hospital for some time without appearing to gain much headway confided to a friend that she "was being slowly poisoned by the meals."

Despite the arguments of nurses and physicians, Italians frequently take their relatives home or transfer them to a different hospital. Only in the case of public charges does this sometimes become known. Particularly when it becomes obvious to a person's connections and friends that an Italian will not recover, he is taken home as soon as possible. "Be sure to take him home," they caution; "you must not let him die in the hospital." This aversion to death in an institution includes even patients in private wards. Even though the latter might be thought to have the status of patients in Italian *cliniche private*, old ideas cannot be quickly uprooted, possibly because in America both charity and paying patients

are usually housed under one roof. Hospitalization in a private room, however, generally arouses less opposition than in wards. Families not otherwise able to finance such a luxury even take out loans at burdensome rates (42 per cent per annum) in order to meet the expense. They invest such debts with the superstitious notion that failure to repay them speedily may "bring the sickness back." These loans frequently lie at the bottom of the family situation which sends people to the "family welfare."

When a social worker attempts to coerce a family into sending a member to a hospital, an obstacle arises in more than a few cases that the following example illustrates:

A man whose wife was quite ill could not bring himself to make the decision alone to send her to a hospital. His physician urged the move, but he went to his favorite brother for counsel. The latter advised against it, much to the regret of the social worker on the case. Discouraged at her failure, she went to the man's brother herself to see if she could find and answer his objection. He listened at length and apparently with understanding to her story and then gave this as his opinion: "Perhaps you are right. Who can say? But me, I cannot advise it. People would say I was jealous and trying to get rid of my sister-in-law. If she died, everyone would blame me."

Mutual suspicion and jealousy, so marked a trait of Italian culture, thus play fundamental rôles again here in the rationalizations of these people.

One outstanding exception to the culturally determined dread of hospital care crops out in this country in the case of childbirth. Although many women still prefer the family physician or a midwife and home confinements, even some among those Italian women who appear to be most retarded in adjustment to American mores are eager to have their babies born in hospitals. They want to leave shortly after delivery, nevertheless, even though nurses argue, "Why did you come to the hospital? We thought you understood that you would have to stay at least a week." The nurses do not understand one of the prime reasons for these women coming

to the hospital. A hospital confinement furnishes a means of avoiding the traditional sexual intercourse rites at the onset of labor—a practice rarely seen nowadays. When the time for this dangerous procedure has passed, an additional stay in the hospital merely means a longer period of subjection to a strange and annoying routine.

Despite the old derogatory beliefs regarding hospitals, the high cost of institutional care is one of the chief deterrents to its wider adoption by the Italian. Equally important is the fact that he has by no means become acculturated to institutional care either in sickness or in old age. He has a strong feeling that the most significant moments of his life should take place under his own roof. To him the bed and the house remain symbolical of family life, and to dissociate them from such important occurrences as birth, marriage, and death is to undermine the very foundations of his culture.

## CHAPTER XI

### CARE OF THE AGED AND OF OTHER DEPENDENTS

THE formal governmental provision for the aged and other dependents in the Italian homeland, while not very extensive, looked adequate in theory but was quite imperfectly put into practice. The only arrangement made for able-bodied paupers was that police might send them at public expense to their native place. The infirm poor could find a place in an infirmary or hospital, and pauper children under nine years of age were admitted to charity schools. In both of these cases, a local institution in the place where the poor person had his settlement rights had to bear the expense. Only where these organizations' budgets were quite inadequate did the community or, in extreme instances, the state, share the burden. Failing to obtain aid, an infirm but never an able-bodied pauper could legally beg. In the case of the sick poor, however, each commune was legally obligated to retain a resident physician and a midwife to serve free of charge; sometimes such specialists were thus subsidized to take care of all the inhabitants of a place. The preceding chapter treats in detail the care of sick dependents. The Provincial Councils were supposed to maintain establishments for insane paupers and, in coöperation with the communes, for foundlings. "And both provinces and communes have large optional powers to make grants to infirmaries, hospitals, orphanages, in fact to any kind of charity."<sup>1</sup> If such provisions for the aged, the poor, and orphans or foundlings had been fully carried out, conditions in the Italy from which our immigrants came would have been quite different. Poverty of an extreme type was so general, however, that if all the dependents who begged in the streets had applied to their

1. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *Italy Today*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, pp. 220-221, p. 221 quoted.

communes for assistance or housing, neither funds nor buildings would have been adequate to accommodate them.

The adjustment of South Italians to the prevalence of poverty, discussed in Chapter II and elsewhere, made this attitude by the government inevitable. Since so many were poor, the peasantry regarded dependence upon public charity rather than poverty itself as the disgrace. People who went to the *ricoveri* (poorhouses) were those who had no relatives left to care for them. Relatives in better circumstances, as Chapter VI brings out, could be compelled to contribute to the maintenance of children and the infirm. Indeed, inmates of *ricoveri* were usually without even friends, for in Italy charitable acts—known as *la pietà*—were not extended occasionally or only to relatives, but daily to neighbors and even to poor and needy persons who were scarcely known at all to the donors. “It is natural,” notes one native writer,<sup>2</sup> “that the people cannot give money to those who are poorer than themselves, since they do not have any, but they perform some of the most delicate and kindly acts of charity as are possible to be found anywhere.” A mother, for instance, would take the responsibility of nursing a neighbor’s baby with the statement, “The good Lord will give me enough milk for two babies.” This arrangement, it must be remembered, “lasts not for a month or two, but for a couple of years.” Servants, upon leaving homes where they work, to give another example, frequently ask permission to take home leftover food. While this may be given to their own children, it may also find its way to some needy neighbor or to an old woman who would otherwise go hungry.

No one went empty-handed to a hospital or prison. The gift might have been merely a couple of wizened oranges, but to visit the sick or needy without some useful gift would have been a breach of the mores in the eyes of friends. Men and women prolonged their hours of toil to earn a few extra *soldi*

2. Matilde Serao, *Il Ventre di Napoli*, Milan, Fratelli Treves, 1884, pp. 91-92.

to buy food for an orphan, a widow, or an elderly person who had no family. According to a native:<sup>8</sup>

One of the best traits of the Italian character is the charitableness of the lower classes themselves. The poor will often go without food to feed those who are poorer. For instance, two servants whom I knew, gave money to help maintain the child of a former fellow-servant who had made an unhappy marriage, her husband having not only ill-treated her, but actually swindled these very servants out of a part of their hard-earned savings. Among the poorest classes one constantly comes across examples of the most beautiful and unassuming charity.

Where parents were no longer able to work and fully support themselves, they looked to their children for assistance. The oldest son when he married usually expected to bring his bride to his parents' home. As the physical powers of the old folks failed, he and his wife assumed more and more of their duties and left to the parents only those tasks recognized as proper for people of advanced years. Those who had managed to save a little money or who owned the house in which they lived with their son and daughter-in-law did not feel humiliating dependence but settled down to a peaceful and respected old age. The patriarchal tradition thus provided a setup well adapted to agricultural communities like those of South Italy. The age of such retirement was reached much earlier in Italy, incidentally, than is usual in America. The strenuousness of the struggle for existence and the fact that people became grandparents at an earlier age probably contributed considerably to this situation.

The widespread sympathy for the poor and sick, labeled *la pietà*, did not represent a sentimental expression by a group that did not face the facts in a realistic manner. It was a sort of insurance adjustment made by people who knew all too well that they themselves might sooner or later be subjected to similar experiences. Their notion of those constituting the

8. Luigi Villari, *Italian Life in Town and Country*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902, p. 72.

“deserving poor” did not include the shiftless and lazy. “All members of a family perform, as a consequence, their appointed task. A person who does not accomplish his share, or who will not work, under some pretext or other, is looked at askance, and is given a meagre share of food. In fact, he may even be treated with some cruelty. The amount of work for each member is apportioned according to sex and age.”<sup>4</sup> Where dependent members of a family could not perform their share, they were not foisted off on the community’s *ricoveri* but were supported by the joint endeavors of their own relatives, even when this meant deprivation.

A law of 1890 placed the regulation of charitable endowments in the hands of a *Congregazione di carità* (Council of Charity) in each commune. Even though legislation for the care of dependents was inadequate and even more inadequately carried out and although money granted by the government for the improvement of sanitation and the housing of the poor was frequently diverted into other channels, Italy had noteworthy charities, well managed by these Councils. “There are richly endowed orphanages, lunatic asylums, deaf-and-dumb establishments, and schools for the blind.”<sup>5</sup> New funds for such institutions, however, fluctuated widely in amount, especially in the south. This characteristic accorded well, of course, with the Italian notion of charity as outlined in the preceding chapter and touched upon above. The Councils dealt particularly with the poorhouses and infirmaries that developed so rapidly in South Italy in 1880–1910. The infirmaries housed men and women who were entirely or partially incapacitated. The inmates received from one third to two thirds of the profits from light work or were paid a modest wage for domestic service in the institution. Paupers had to enter a *ricovero* (poorhouse) or, if they were beggars, sometimes a special *ricovero di mendicità* (poorhouse for beggars). Otherwise, except for the loss of their vote, they did not suffer from any official taint of pauperism

4. Francesco Coletti, *La Popolazione Rurale in Italia*, Piacenze, Federazione Italiana dei Consorzi Agrari, 1925, p. 24.

5. Luigi Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

and were provided with pleasant work to do, suited to their strength and ability. This contrasts with the dreariness of many of our American poorhouses where inmates are often treated like prisoners.

Other than infirmaries and poorhouses, the Councils spent their funds chiefly on outdoor relief. This included the handling of "the *poveri vergognosi* (the 'shame-faced poor' [note that there is no mincing of words here], who have come down from better circumstances), maternity cases, and dowries."<sup>6</sup> Without a dowry, orphan girls would have had a poor chance of marriage. The welfare of a community depended, after all, upon the marriage of everyone, man and woman. An unmarried woman in particular was thought a great liability. Whereas a man was free to come and go in his search for work, a spinster still had to observe the proprieties and limit her activities outside her home even though she was past an "interesting" age. The only work open to her was that which was in keeping with her single status. When she had passed the child-bearing age, she was merely relegated to the aged group. Such women frequently served as housekeepers for parish priests or as family drudges for married brothers or sisters. Widows, especially those with children, came under the same code. They escaped the equivalent of a spinster's status only by speedily marrying again.

The poor found the *Monti di Pietà* (pawnshops) a useful means for self-help and patronized them extensively. When properly controlled by the Councils of Charity, as they were in some places, these organizations furnished real assistance to poor peasants in times of bad harvest. Much money was also loaned privately, but such private usurers—usually elderly men and women—frequently got their debtors into their toils and made them pay the value of the pawned article many times over; and then it might be lost for good anyway. A peasant might see her best shawl or her only silk dress worn by a usurer at church, but she had no redress.

Savings banks, insurance companies, and mutual-benefit societies existed in great numbers, with Campania among the

6. Bolton King and Thomas Okey, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

southern provinces having the greatest proportional supply of these. The mutual-benefit societies, generally named for the patron saint of a village, undertook especially the provision of sickness and death benefits. Since the monthly sum paid by each member was small, sickness benefits could not be continued for more than a few weeks. The National Fund for Insurance against Accidents dated from 1833, but employers were not compelled until 1914 to make the payments necessary for the participation of their employees in it. This Fund granted compensation commensurate with the severity of the injuries sustained, whether of a temporary or permanent nature. The National Provident Fund, started in 1898 and developed in 1901 into the National Provident Fund for Old Age Pensions and Invalidity, was on a voluntary rather than compulsory basis. The following statement summarized its functioning in 1918:

The fund not only possesses a capital of ten million francs, but receives grants from the proceeds of several lotteries sanctioned by the State, and half the annual profits of the Post Office Savings Bank. It ensures pensions beginning either at sixty or sixty-five years to any persons who have been insured for not less than twenty-five years, the sum varying from 118 to 881 francs annually, according to the amount and duration of his payments. Nevertheless the number of subscribers to the Fund is relatively small, and a measure making this form of insurance compulsory is most desirable in the interest of the masses.<sup>7</sup>

From these facts, it will be seen that neither the accident nor the old-age schemes meant much to those who later came from South Italy to America. The burdens of temporary and permanent disability and of old age fell in most cases squarely upon the individual family, its relatives, and its friends.

Subnormal and feeble-minded children, as the foregoing suggests, were generally kept, as far as possible, in their own families. They could, after all, usually perform small tasks that helped to contribute to the joint maintenance. The strong

7. Helen Zimmern and Antonio Agresti, *New Italy*, London, Constable & Co., Ltd., 1918, pp. 188-189.

feeling of parents against the institutionalization of their children sprang partly from the social stigma attached and partly from the sense of guilt that the situation gave them. Many of the feeble-minded children in institutions were illegitimates drawn from foundling homes.

In all the folkways and mores connected with old age and other dependence, then, one sees clearly depicted the typical attitude of the South Italian living in small towns regarding group sharing and group sin. It resulted in keen opposition to the transfer of social responsibilities to the state—an antagonism only accentuated by the levying of taxes for such a transfer.

#### *IN AMERICA*

THE migration of these people to the United States shortly necessitated the adoption of expedients that undermined the group-sharing and group-sin concepts. Here maintenance for the old and dependent tends to be placed more and more on an abstract "cold cash" rather than on a sharing basis. The prestige that once accrued to the individual from acts of *la pietà* gradually disappeared as the processes of assimilation into the relative anonymity of an urban environment made their marks. With the passing of *la pietà*, one of the strongest factors in the maintenance and upbuilding of Italian family life is being lost.

The old people of the first generation constitute a different problem in America than do old American-born Italians. The Italian-born present more nearly the same physical symptoms of age that did old people in Italy. These include loss of teeth, a slowing up of powers, bent body, and wrinkles in the face at a relatively early age (forty to fifty years). In addition, their consciousness of cultural differences and their keener sense of struggle for adjustment hasten this aging process. They are seldom seen outside their own or their children's homes. They attend church on Sundays if it is not too far away and at least manage to be present on such special occasions as Christmas and Easter. In good weather, they may be found sitting in the yard or on the porch, but in win-

ter they hibernate, even when not bedridden as many are. Realizing that all anyone can do for their illnesses is to alleviate and not to cure, they hold expenditures for medical specialists—folk or scientific—down to a minimum. They do not like to waste "good money." They expect pain and disablement with advancing years as the normal thing in life, the natural prelude to death. Why waste the substance of their children in struggling against the inevitable?

In most cases, children provide the best care they can for their aging parents. As in Italy, the eldest or the youngest son often takes them into his home or lives with them in theirs. Possible conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, due frequently to differences in cultural background, are touched upon in Chapter VI. The following statement expresses a typical attitude:

My husband's mother lives with us. She makes me much work, but what can I do? We must keep her or lose face. Besides my husband would not like it. "You lose everything when you lose your mother," he says.

The force of family ties is still clearly shown in the many folk sayings current in this group representing the love between parent and child. From such traditions springs the horror with which Italians view the notion of turning father or mother out of the home. To prevent clashes between the old ways and the new, however, separate quarters are sometimes provided for the parents under the same roof. On holidays and in the evenings, married children gather in the home where the old folks live to discuss plans for them, figure out the amount of money needed for their care, and in general plan for the future. The feebler the old folks grow, the more frequent are these visits until they occur daily.

In an old-fashioned immigrant home, the opinion and advice of the old are respectfully asked and considered; the parents appear to keep much of their authority over their family as long as they live. Their opinions and ideas are frequently quoted, and, when they are gone, the children feel that with

them have gone all the old tales and folk sayings constituting one of the main bonds between their family and Italy. "You should have known my mother," an adult born in this country sadly remarked. "She could have told you all sorts of things that Americans don't know."

These attitudes toward the aged, with the changed conditions of life in this country, present some odd problems. Sons and daughters become indignant at the expectation of Americans that their fathers should continue to work at full-time tasks at an age thought advanced in Italy. "My father is too old to work," says a man of his apparently hale and hearty fifty-year-old father. Others who know something of the standards of this country excuse the alleged inability of their father to work on the grounds that "ten years ago my father broke a rib" or "had pneumonia" and hence has never been able to work properly since. There is, as a matter of fact, some justification for this attitude when one considers how few jobs are thought in America to be the prerogative of the old and the relatively early age at which we now call a man unemployable. If a man has even a slight impediment, too, he is apt to be relegated to the unemployable group in this fast-moving civilization. Although stiff fingers, the slower movements of advancing age, and a limp due to an improperly healed fracture may be but minor defects in a field laborer, they prove decided liabilities in an industrial worker. We paradoxically expect men to work until they are some sixty or sixty-five years of age but do not provide those of fifty or more with adequate opportunities. And then we wonder that Italians believe their parents should have economic aid at the age of fifty. Even at this, however, the request for aid is made quite reluctantly and without any notion of shifting the whole burden of parent or parents onto society. Among others, the question must be answered as to whether independence shall be maintained at all costs—even at that of creating living conditions to which the city health department sooner or later will object—or aid should after all be sought.

Many Americans would fail to associate reluctance in the acceptance of charity with Italians. In addition to the facts

given, however, the point is substantiated by the ethnic backgrounds of street beggars. "It is curious," asserts Jacob Riis,<sup>8</sup> "to find preconceived notions quite upset in a review of the nationalities that go to make up this squad of street-beggars. The Irish head the list with fifteen per cent . . . while the Italian . . . has less than two per cent." Throughout this country, in addition, the ratio of Italian inmates to the total population of our almshouses is low. This, however, may be explained in part by the relatively small proportion of old people among them, due to the recency of Italian immigration. In one institution in a city with a large Italian population, during depression years, only 18 of the 348 inmates were of Italian stock, far less than their proportionate share (about one third) of the population. These eighteen included three women and fifteen men. The statement of the matron that few of the Italians had visitors leads one to surmise that the lack of relatives was responsible for their institutionalization in the first place. The fact that three of the eighteen were infirmary cases suggests that, were there in this country as in Italy hospitals for the chronically sick and aged poor, the number of inmates would have been even less.

Many factors have tended to undermine this reluctance in this country. Some of these have already been mentioned elsewhere; for example, the family conflicts due to exogamous marriages and the institution of relief among the poor. The high standards of living in this country and the emphasis placed upon striving for a higher standard than that which a given family has achieved are equally significant. Should a man lower the standards of his living conditions by overcrowding his home, he is more likely to fall in status among his compatriots for this act than for asking for help for his aging relatives. "I only ask for the rent. We, I and my sisters, we give the eat." Who among social workers has not heard this request? In the instance referred to, it was made by a quiet shrinking man who had probably pondered the matter several days before bringing himself to this point.

8. *How the Other Half Lives*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926, p. 249.

The public ideals of Americans as shown by our provision for the aged poor do not tend to preserve that sense of self-respect and value for the old that characterized the Italian social system. In America inmates of poorhouses have not the opportunity to earn a little money that they had in Italy. Here inmates capable of work are employed about the house and grounds, but the authorities consider that room and board constitute a sufficient return for such services. A little "money in the hand," however, would help to keep intact the bond between the old life and the new and cloistered one. Personal needs could then be taken care of independently. Gifts could be purchased for the family left behind. And all this accomplished without dependence on that family, who, after all, would probably not have sent the old people away if there had been sufficient funds to support them at home.

A private individual in a large city attempted to establish a home exclusively for aged Italians. He owned a large tenement house in the Italian district that was thought suitable for the purpose partly because it would keep the old folks within easy reach of their relatives, and partly because the owner had not been able to make a financial success of the building. Contributions for remodelling were solicited and readily given by the Italians, but these donors probably wondered where the inmates—whose payments were to maintain the home—were to come from. This proved the stumbling block. Elderly people with relatives willing to support them did not wish to enter the home, and those who had no one and were thus eligible had no means of paying the charges assessed.

In America as in Italy, Italians are no more willing to commit feeble-minded dependents to institutions than they are the aged. Mothers may grumble about the extra work necessitated; fathers may lament that they must feed and clothe children who will never contribute materially to the family income, if at all; but when the psychiatric social worker suggests that a child might well be sent away the parents look at her in horror. Upon the death of the parents, brothers and sisters still take over this responsibility in most cases and treat the defective adult with the same tenderness and considera-

tion that is lavished on their own children. Changing economic conditions, however, including limited housing capacity and other factors involved in the transfer from rural life, are making these people less tenacious of such old traditions. Through the help of various agencies and clinics, parents' ideas of what is right and wrong in the care of defectives are being modified at an early period in order that a certain amount of preventive treatment may be instituted.

Unmarried Italian adults, as a general rule, do not live alone as do young Americans. This tends to place spinsters and widows in much the same status in this country as they were in Italy. A young married couple, however, although in fairly good circumstances, refused to aid a spinster sister of the husband. "She should have got married," he insisted. "She had chances enough." This couple consented nevertheless to take in the widowed mother with whom the spinster had been living before she lost her job. They realized that separation would be a great hardship for both mother and spinster daughter, but the Italian is practical.

The reputation of a young widow still necessitates remarriage. Despite the fact that labor conditions make it possible for women to be independent, even when they have minor children, comments such as this may still be heard: "She should marry. It gives her a bad name to live like this"—in other words, unmarried. "Of course we understand now it means nothing, but she should marry. She will be lonely when the children grow up and leave her." These remarks demonstrate the strength of tradition in the face of a realization that conditions are changing. No dependents make a stronger appeal to the Italian than a widow and her children. Whether it is her own relatives who interest themselves in her behalf, her church, or a mutual aid society, aid is given without hesitation. After using their own resources to the utmost, they turn readily to the community at large for further assistance. All such requests are made in the name of humanity. The actual economic need is set forth, not as a measure of the amount to be given or the type of aid considered desirable, but as the basic reason for giving.

Many a wife has quarreled with her husband over money given from his scant income to his widowed sister. Insurance, often endowment policies, are looked upon as the most valuable of assets, and thus relatives take over the responsibility for weekly payments on them for the widow in order to keep them from lapsing regardless of other considerations. Looking more deeply into the motives prompting such actions, one readily learns that relatives are thus only protecting their own interests, for in the event of the widow's death they might otherwise have to pay for her funeral themselves. These ulterior motives, so called, however, are not uncommon and result from a common-sense view of the realities of life. Italians had to give thought in the past to such considerations, and their whole attitude is still colored by moral patterns, the true nature of which they often do not fully understand. The following translation of an extract from a letter sent by an Italian merchant in Brooklyn to his recently widowed sister is to the point:

After having joined my wife in sending you our heartiest salutations, I hasten to urge you not to forget on any account to pay your weekly installments on your insurance policies. In fact, I will do my utmost to pay them myself, because I want you to realize that your brother has not forgotten you, and will do everything that he can to help you.

*La pietà* remains so compelling an obligation in this country that a Protestant minister, an Italian, busied himself on behalf of a Roman Catholic widow. "Though Mrs. G—— has no religious connection with this church," he wrote to a welfare organization, "we are, however, willing to give good references for her, and would do more than any good words, had we the financial means to do so. In behalf of humanity . . ."

Lotteries are still generally recognized as suitable and successful means for raising money for charitable purposes. "All of the proceeds of this raffle," announced one prospectus, "are to go to a very poor Italian family consisting of a husband, wife, and seven small children. The husband has been out of work for a considerable length of time and the family has

been repeatedly hit, time after time with some misfortune." The circular concluded with the note, "Your generous offering . . . shall be perpetually remembered in the prayers of the little ones in whose behalf the offering was and is being given."

Italians of the first generation and all who cling to the old traditions do not understand the American method of giving charity. They believe that we have deprived the act of all the prestige and satisfaction attached to personal contact with its recipients. The bookkeeping and the whole business of relief agencies and bureaus for the collection of funds antagonize rather than encourage them to share in such enterprises. They think that all aid given should be offered in the spirit of surprising the recipient, a gift for which no accounting is expected. In return, the recipient should make no comment on the gift, its suitability for his particular needs, its extent, or any other characteristic. It is to be accepted merely in the spirit in which Italians give, "in the name of sweet charity," as an act of *la pietà*. This viewpoint is almost entirely responsible for that spirit of so-called ingratitude commonly thought characteristic of the needy poor among the Italians. The cross-questioning they undergo and the responsibility that is attached to the handling and disposition of the so-called gifts elicit the criticism and discontent with which the gifts are received. Some agencies wisely avoid such problems by issuing relief as a loan. Since Italians are accustomed to this procedure, including penurious restrictions under which loans were made in their own country, they comply more readily under such conditions with demands for statements as to how the money is to be used and the state of their present assets.

The older generation of South Italians continues to give charity in its own way. Landlords, as Chapter III points out, permit tenants to remain on for months and even years without payment of rent. They merely ask in lieu of money the performance of casual jobs, many of which might not otherwise have been thought necessary. They are pleased, of course, with the overwhelming sense of gratitude that brings the ten-

ant to insist upon making this return. Storekeepers, too, as Chapter IV notes, extend almost unlimited credit, even when they realize that the prospect of payment is quite poor. True, they may restrict the purchaser to a choice of less desirable articles or to such fruit and vegetables as need hours of painstaking labor to pick out the good parts, but such are the privileges of those who give and ask no questions as to how the gift is to be used. Physicians pay free visits and simply say, "Pay me when you can." Neighbors carry over to a poor friend's house plates of food, day after day. They reserve to themselves, of course, the right to do so when *pasta fasuli* (beans and macaroni) are on the menu and to withhold their bounty when veal cutlets appear. The following incident illustrates this point:

A woman died in a family which had no relatives living near enough to provide the necessary refreshments for the wake. Not being willing to break the taboo on cooking at such a time, the family applied to a neighbor on the first floor, who for three days bought and prepared the necessary refreshments for the wake. One day the daughter of the donor purchased a grade of crackers that her mother thought too expensive. "The cheap ones are good enough," she asserted, and the girl went back to the store to exchange them.

Such small expressions of charitableness help to bind the Italian community more closely together than all the modern clubs offered to poor people by American social workers. The daily contacts, the discussions at the local stores, and the casual meetings on the street take place without the formality that stultifies the simple Italian spirit of enjoyment and prevents the free flow of talk that gives these people the sense of security arising from an understanding of each other's lives. The retention of such customs as those surrounding the care of the aged and other dependents serves as a measure of self-protection and insurance in a world to which they can only gradually adjust themselves.

## CHAPTER XII

### DEATH AND MORTUARY PRACTICES

#### *IN ITALY*

ITALIAN peasants, as we have seen, had to compensate for their lack of leisure time through cultivating the pleasure elements in such serious activities as work and worship. This same element was incorporated by Italians of the last century even in their observance of that most solemn occasion, death. None mourned more sincerely than did these South Italians, but they did not think it incompatible with their exhibition of grief to attach a measure of festivity to the social and religious rites surrounding death and interment. Even among the poor, the folk ritual provided for the ceremonial performance of certain propitiatory and avoidance practices that had entertaining as well as religiously and economically expedient aspects. These ceremonial practices found rich and varied expression, of which abstinence, the wearing of mourning for years and sometimes for life, and semiseclusion were only a few manifestations. In this chapter are sketched folk practices and beliefs connected with death whose number and primitiveness approximate those associated with pregnancy and birth.

Preoccupation with death, especially at the time of the decease of a dear one, "is one of the penalties of being a 'rational animal.' . . . Chickens squawk excitedly when a somnolent comrade is plucked by the feet off the roost, then settle down and forget it. Men must needs worry over one another's passing, the more so in view of the widespread conviction that death need not be."<sup>1</sup> Christianity aided the South Italians in withstanding this shock by preaching that death was inevitable and usually a divine compliment to the deceased. As one of their proverbs sets forth, "God takes the good and leaves

1. A. G. Keller, *Man's Rough Road*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1932, p. 198.

the weeds standing." Despite such assurances, their grief was nonetheless intense. Resignation came, however, through the acceptance finally of the necessity for faith in, and acquiescence to, the workings of Divine Law. The preparation of their dead for life in Purgatory, Paradise, or even Hell gave the bereaved ones the feeling that they "had done what they could," some insurance that their own survivors would do likewise.

Death did not come unheralded to those who were wise enough to detect premonitions of it. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning being what it is, survivors and especially experts in the subject could always point to signs that had been disregarded at the time. Even where physical indications were lacking, someone's end was frequently revealed by such omens as the howling of a dog, the sound of sweeping where no broom was being used, and the sound of or the feeling of a draught from the opening of a door or window where no door or window existed. One death was said to follow another. The sex and status of the next victim was suggested by those of the corpse. If the deceased were an old man, the next to die would also be an old man; if a little girl, the deaths of two other little girls would be inevitable within a short space of time.

South Italians believed that to each person God has allotted a certain span of life. If for some reason this span was cut short by sudden death, murder, or suicide, the ghost was condemned to appear at the place where the death occurred until the assigned time had passed. The ghosts of such people were termed "condemned souls." They were classed with those who died in hospitals and with those legally executed by hanging or burning. These ghosts had to be laid by a priest or avenged by a relative in the same manner that Hamlet avenged his father's restless spirit. Just as the groans of his father's ghost, too, revealed to Hamlet the identity of the murderer, so Italians believed that the whistling of the wind represents efforts of ghosts to reveal the means of their own death. A Neapolitan recalls the following:

When I was a boy, there used to be a spot where a dog appeared at

night. A man had been murdered there, and as it was a public road the people were afraid and asked the priest to help them. He went to the place at midnight, and when a dog appeared, sprinkled it with holy water and asked, "In the name of God, why do you appear?" He then said a prayer, making the sign of the cross, and the dog disappeared, never to return.

At times a light, like a will-o'-the-wisp, was said to appear, or a wall would rise between the fatal spot and the passerby. At all events, Italians of all regions believed in the lingering of the ghost near the body and practiced means for facilitating the severance of this connection.

When Sicilians thought that evidence existed pointing to a delay in the separation between a ghost and a body, they attributed the situation to some sin for which the dying man had not asked and received absolution. Giuseppe Pitrè<sup>2</sup> notes,

Among the ancient statutes there was one which was issued in 1553, which ruled that after three days of illness, if the patient did not recover, it was the duty of the attending physician to have the viaticum brought to his patient. There was also a regulation in force up till the middle of the past century [the nineteenth] that no person who came to the Grande Spedale [chief hospital] at Palermo, should leave without previously making his confession.

To insure the soul's passing or, as Sicilians spoke of it, to "insure a good agony,"<sup>3</sup> relatives lit candles blessed at the Feast of Saint Candelora and placed them around the bed of the dying.

The unity of each community was strongly expressed in death rites. When a member died, all were affected. As the traditional passing bell rang from the church, men and women stopped working, crossed themselves, and said a prayer for the departed. The number of times that the bell tolled was determined by the relative wealth of the deceased's family. Such customs as cessation of work were, of course, only possible in

2. *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, Palermo, L. Pedone Lauriel di Carlo Clausen, 1889, Vol. XV, p. 201.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

agricultural communities and gradually disappeared from general usage among those who took up factory work. In the room where the body lay, a window was always left open for some days after the death, so that the soul might visit its former abode. A Palermo peasant told an Englishwoman<sup>4</sup> traveling in Sicily, "My husband's soul has not left the room yet." She asserted that "sometimes we have to call upon it from the street." In answer to a question regarding its exact whereabouts, the peasant remarked that "it left the body at once, it always does, but the soul does not leave the house immediately, you know." She claimed that it "takes three days for the soul to settle." Should a butterfly or a dove be seen shortly after a person dies, the Italians believed that the deceased had become an angel. This did not prevent it from wandering around the house, however, and entering it again to partake of a special loaf of bread freshly baked and set out on a chair. This bread was left for the three days following death near a door of the house held ajar by another chair. Near this loaf stood a candle to which was added a second on the second day and a third on the last. This bread and candle custom was recalled by a peasant from Modica, Sicily.

In some places the fate of the soul was learned by the appearance of the evening sky three months after death. A bright, red sunset, with a clear sky, was a favorable prognostication, but a gloomy one with dark lowering clouds augured ill for the departed.

Some thought that the soul was reborn to live again in another human form. This belief was expressed in the giving of the name of a child who died to the next following of the same sex. Owing to numerous deaths in a family, the same name not infrequently might be given three and even four times.

All the customs connected with abstention from work, with fasting, and with the wearing of mourning were rigidly observed. Close relatives did not attend the funeral but remained at home to receive visits of condolence. The family of the deceased did no cooking for a month, and friends and relatives

4. Mrs. Alec-Tweedie, *Sunny Sicily*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1904, p. 14.

brought in the necessary food. Meat and chickens were not included in such gifts of food, however, except for a funeral feast in honor of a person of renown. The visits of close male relatives lasted for three days and of women for nine. Every shutter was closed for as much as a month or more. In some places, the furniture was upset and painted black, and carpets and hangings were dyed the same color. Clocks were all stopped for at least a week, because a soul could not enter the presence of Jehovah with a clock going in its old home. Mirrors were covered, and the mattress of the deceased person was placed outside the house. Like the open window, this latter practice has significant retrospective rationality as a sanitation measure. It is not to be presumed, however, that it was adopted as such. The well-to-do hung black draperies, and the poor, black cloth over doors. The immediate family dressed in black for a year. A wife, however, often wore her mourning costume for the remainder of her life, as much for economy as for respect. In some regions, a widow or a mother who had lost a son did not leave her home for a year except in the early dawn or after dark. This seclusion was associated with the primitive notion of a widow's malevolent influence. Friends dressed in black only for the day of the funeral. Since mourning clothes could be rented for the occasion, this did not involve a very great expenditure. An old Sicilian custom required that men in mourning allow their beards to grow for a year. While seldom found in this century in this extreme form, men in many parts of Italy did remain unshaven for a week or more as a sign of respect.

Overindulgence in mourning or the use of such practices by those who had nothing to mourn occasioned the government to penalize such abuses. Only the wife or husband and children of the deceased were permitted to wear mourning for more than one day. No man except a son might let his beard grow for more than a week. A son might leave his beard uncut for a year. Professional mourners, as Chapter X mentions, perpetuated abuses that led to a determined effort to exterminate them. Such women made a business of walking in procession after the bier. They tore their hair and wailed

loudly. Not seldom, the funeral eulogies made by these women over the dead body as it lay in the house caused trouble. Such orations frequently contained far from subtle allusions to the envy or hatred of some enemy of the family, the alleged cause of the death. Because of the feuds that these professionals kept alive, Frederick III of Sicily made them the butt of his drive against objectionable funeral customs. Any woman who forced such services on a family, as was frequently done, was obliged to serve three months in the Hospital of the Cubba at Palermo.

The Italians had no word for "undertaker." Their experts, who were known as *direttori di pompe funebri*, followed this vocation only in the large towns. Among peasants, the body was commonly prepared for burial by relatives or some village woman experienced in such work. It was dressed in its best, sometimes in new clothing, and a virgin was always decked in white. In Modica, no shoes were put on the feet because it was forbidden to appear shod in the presence of God. In some towns, the clothes worn at one's wedding were laid aside until death. The dead were often seated in a lifelike position on a chair or couch and then afterwards transferred to a casket. In certain small towns in Sicily, the people made a practice of placing death masks either over the face of dead children or at the side of the coffin. When a coffin was reopened later, as was often the custom on All Souls' Day, wherever this was feasible, the parents then had the satisfaction of beholding the faces of their beloved dead unaltered.

The usages governing the death and burial of a child brought about a conflict between ritualistic joy and actual sorrow to an extent not found in the case of adults. The customary keynote of the occasion was one of cheerfulness. One greeted the news with the words, "Glory and Paradise!" Bells were rung merrily, and no one was permitted to weep. Sorrow was an insult to the good Jehovah who had selected the child for a far better destiny than it might ever have attained on earth. The Italian could thus fortify himself in this as in so many other instances against his overpowering sense of loss or futility, with a firm philosophy that explained so many

eventualities. Pitrè<sup>5</sup> catches the spirit of such an occasion thus:

The funeral laying out of a child is usually only attended by women, either from the family or the neighborhood. They sit almost silent around the table, with mixed feelings, scarcely knowing what to do. Only the mother is torn between her terrible grief and the effort to keep back her tears.

The body of the child was attired in white, with a red ribbon round waist and neck. From the latter hung a cross. A thin veil was placed over the head and breast. All around and over it were strewn leaves of orange and lemon trees and of myrtle and twigs of rosemary. On the head was a crown of flowers and leaves. Lighted candles stood all around the coffin.

Bodies were universally disposed of by burying. Cremation was almost unknown, and its wider adoption was firmly held in check by the Church's taboo on it. A family using cremation would bring excommunication on the heads of all responsible members. The grave was dug by the *becchino* (sexton). Since there were few roads and the country paths or tracks were narrow and rough, bodies were carried by bearers to the cemetery. These men were usually relatives, members of the deceased's fraternal society, Brothers of Pity, or four sextons maintained by the town for the use of the very poor. The parish churches kept a casket that they loaned for use during the procession only. The cheap boxlike coffin, in the case of a poor family, fitted into this more elaborate affair. Funeral carriages, such as are common in this country, were unknown outside the large towns of South Italy. During the procession, the parish bell tolled again the proper number of times, and volunteer or hired musicians played a dirge.

The sight of a funeral procession was unlucky, especially to a married pair. When it was known that a funeral was to pass a house, the cautious housewife placed a broom at the entrance or on a window sill. Mourning, too, could not be worn at a wedding, lest it bring the worst of luck.

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

Mortuary customs and beliefs also alleged some beneficial consequences for the surviving to offset the gloom. When it rained on the day of the funeral, eight days of rain would follow, a good sign in a country with a scant and irregular rainfall. In some parts of Sicily, people cut off a piece of the dead man's hair or a strip of his clothes and preserved these reliques in the belief that the departed's virtues might thus be passed on to the owner of such fetishistic objects. To touch a corpse's hand or face was thought to be a specific for impetigo.

When one chooses to overlook the compensation that South Italians reaped from such practices, the cost of these elaborate observances in both money and time makes them appear to be an abuse. The poor peasant could ill afford such sacrifices, for example, as the destruction of furniture. Various rules, temporal and spiritual, inveighed against the extravagances and established fines, penances, and even excommunication as penalties, but they accomplished only slight modifications. At death, the South Italian was faced with the universal human need for a believable rationalization that would shield him from any possible feeling of doubt and, above all, futility. His ritual, regardless of arguments and of punishments, rendered believable the rationalizations furnished to him by his culture.

#### *IN AMERICA*

THE greatly raised standard of living among the Italians in this country, together with the facilities available, have changed decidedly their death and mortuary practices. The beliefs behind these practices, however, have been more resistant. The modern Italian funeral in America has little in common with its counterpart in South Italy, but the people still hold their old notions about the return of the ghost to its former home. The beliefs are modified, when they do change, in intensity rather than form. When social workers or physicians hear "queer ideas" from members of this group under stress, they had best consider their group's culture first and

hold in abeyance any urge to send them to a psychiatric clinic or a mental hospital.

Visions, apparitions, and other supernatural manifestations are freely discussed before children in many first-generation homes. Sometimes these phenomena are thought as valid here as they were in Italy. At all events, it is doubtful if they are ever ridiculed by the old people, and the effect of such serious discussions on the young is of considerable significance. The latter do not hear these beliefs lightly treated until they discuss them with companions of other nationalities outside their homes. While the outward forms may change, it is thus quite probable that the fundamental beliefs behind them will long endure.

The idea of the rebirth of the soul in another form accounts in this country for such incidents as the following:

A man, long unemployed, was finally obliged to seek financial assistance from the town. After he had been getting funds in this way for several months, he announced that he was expecting an addition to his already large family. He admitted that the moment was far from an auspicious one on which to increase his roll of dependents, but he pointed out that his wife was anxious to have a child to replace one recently lost. This need overcame their scruples. Whether this notion functioned as a cause or merely as a rationalization after the fact, it is a belief with considerable significance for the social worker.

Another couple had fifteen living children, the survivors from twenty-three pregnancies. Both parents were proud of their large family, which included quadruplets, two sets of triplets, and three sets of twins. Among the twenty-three names assigned, two Antoinettes, one Andrew, and one Tony had died, but the fifteen survivors included children with each of these names. Antoinette was a spoiled child. "We must let her have her own way," said a sister, "because she is Antoinette, you see." The mother took this child every Saturday to visit the graves of her namesakes.

With more money available, South Italians give vent in their funeral celebrations to their festive urge in the form of floral decorations and a lengthy funeral cortege. The under-

taker assumes control of matters in this country as master of ceremonies of the whole proceedings, from immediately after death to the final scene in the graveyard. He is variously known to his clients as the "undrataker," the *becca-morto* (dialect from *beccino*, sexton), and the *sotterratore*.

The dead are never left alone until the burial has taken place. In this country as in Italy, those in the house must start a loud ritualistic wailing as soon as the soul has left the body. This practice apparently involves, in at least the form of a survival, the notion that noise-making warns off evil spirits and helps to lay the ghost of the deceased. During the wake, as among the Irish, relatives and friends gather together for the customary period. Many pay short visits throughout the day, and men arrive from their work in the evening and, if they are near relatives, are expected to remain all through the night. Pale, tired faces, low efficiency, and mistakes may call forth criticism from a factory foreman the next day. If a man belongs to the first generation or is retarded in this aspect of his adjustment to American ways, he will be apt to say nothing or use the universal excuse that he was ill. The wake must be carried on in traditional form. How many unnecessary discussions, investigations, and visits to the physician are set on foot in this way! Refreshments are served during the evenings of the wake but seldom during the day. Meat is omitted from the dishes, all of which the relatives bring in. The widow must not eat meat for a month nor go out of the house for a week. The shortening of the latter period is an adaptation to the change in environment.

The taboo on weeping for the death of a child has broken down in this country. Some people, however, still believe that a child's corpse must not be touched by the living or it will turn black. A desperate mother was held back by her daughters from throwing herself in despair on her dead child's breast. The girls shrieked, panic-stricken, and warned her of what would happen. Such an emotional outbreak rarely occurs before friends. The self-control of women and men alike in the face of their loss cannot help but impress the onlooker.

Relatives, if physically able to do so, attend the church

service and interment. If there are enough men in the family, they act as bearers; if not, friends step in to help. When a man who has belonged to a society dies, his coffin is frequently borne to and from the church by representatives of the fraternity. Mutual-benefit societies, in fact, are frequently organized solely or largely for funeral-benefit purposes. They pay smaller sums at the death of a woman than of a man, because a widower can presumably by his work meet some of the expense. Membership is restricted almost entirely to people originating from the same town in Italy.

Who has not seen the long, dreary procession of rented cars rolling slowly through the streets? It holds up heavy traffic as much because a funeral has the courtesy of the right of way as because it is considered unlucky to cross through it. The undertaker determines the extent of his preparations and the number of automobiles largely by inquiring the size of the life insurance policy left by the deceased. If a policy has a \$600 value, the funeral will be priced from \$450 to \$500. The undertaker will then give as much in return for this fee as he thinks circumstances warrant. It takes a very strong-minded person to insist upon having the full amount of a policy paid to him and of then handling it himself in order to keep the size of the sum from the undertaker. Even then, however, this man may visit the insurance agent and pay him a commission for the information. The highly emotional Italian is easily exploited at such a time. He believes that his affection and respect are measured by the cost of the funeral, the extent of the display. The following incidents are illustrative:

Two families who were living in modest circumstances even for Italians spent large sums—\$900 and \$600—for each of two funerals. In the first instance, \$1200 had been realized from the deceased's insurance policy. The family continued to live in much the same manner and paid off a few back debts with the balance of the sum received. In the second case, the \$600 represented the full amount of the policy. This family had its funeral and applied for relief at a local agency.



*"Food for the next life" placed in the coffin of a child.*

*(Picture used with kind permission of the parents.)*



A man on relief was carrying an insurance policy on his mother-in-law's life as well as on his own. A social worker from the city charity department suggested that he reduce his mother-in-law's policy to one for \$200. This would pay for a modest funeral. "And what a funeral!" he asserted. "I should be the laugh of the neighbors."

Most of the usages of Italy regarding the clothing of the dead and decoration of the casket continue in this country. A rare custom was discovered in use in this connection. The body of a child was covered with *confetti* (Jordan almonds), an illustration of the survival of the idea of food for the next life. A picture of this corpse in its coffin is reproduced here through the courtesy of the departed's parents. It was formerly the custom here to put favorite articles of clothing in the coffin, such as shoes, gloves, and handkerchiefs. Personal jewelry worn by the deceased used always to be buried with the body, but undertakers have discouraged this practice. Occasionally wedding rings are still left in the coffin, but these frequently are kept by the family and worn by a sister or daughter. Thus undertakers have served to eliminate the difference between Italian and American usage in this respect. Pictures are usually taken of the casket with the flowers and wreaths surrounding it. A popular custom is to have a cardboard gilt clock set upon an easel near the coffin with the hands pointing to the hour at which death occurred. Copies of the picture are given to relatives, and the family itself has one framed to hang in its home or to place on the grave. Italians who speak of such customs invariably claim that their use denotes a very old-fashioned family, and laugh or show a little embarrassment in alluding to such situations.

A prayer stool may always be found near a casket so that those who come to pay their respects may kneel and say a prayer for the dead. Children will run in from the street on the way home from school to say a requiem for a friend. They kneel down for a moment without the slightest hesitation, and on rising gaze with composure on the face of one who may have been a close companion or perhaps only a schoolmate,

seen at rare intervals. In the latter case, one feels that there is an element of curiosity in the situation. The main point is, however, that death like other natural processes is discussed more freely by Italians, and that the stress is on acceptance of a natural fact rather than on resistance to it, in all the aspects of their culture. "Ah! Ah! Who has not been through this before? Everyone has someone dead," a woman observed to her weeping friend. She thought that the latter had, in one week, spent sufficient time in manifestations of extreme grief.

Other obligations to the dead must be attended to, observed variously according to financial ability. Many families send to their friends and relatives cards that bear a special prayer for the deceased. Repetition of this prayer gains indulgence for those who coöperate and mercy in Purgatory and at the Judgment Seat for the departed soul. Other practices are chiefly those current in the Roman Catholic Church, which tries to eliminate more and more of the extremely superstitious usages of its disparate flocks in this country.

Whether such practices are retained or cast aside depends in the last analysis on what the two groups—the first generation and their descendants—each believe essential to their well-being. No departure from the old accepted pattern hurts the older generation more keenly than the rejection of spiritual beliefs, particularly ones dealing with the care of the dead. Many misunderstandings spring up over such differences that promote the sense of fear, the feeling of insecurity, and the belief that prestige is declining. Herein lies the explanation of the defensive attitude which turns immigrants not only against the world outside their doors but sometimes even against those who have hitherto been most dear to them—their own children.

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